



# Rhodesia's Approach to Counterinsurgency: A Preference For Killing

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**I**N THE 1970s, a bloody insurgency took place in Rhodesia, now present-day Zimbabwe. African insurgents faced a settler-state determined to keep power in white hands. The government adopted a punitive and enemy-centric counterinsurgency strategy. Many Rhodesian soldiers embraced the punitive

approach to such an extent that they overextended the rules of engagement. Although the Rhodesian Bush War took place in its unique historical context, it should also serve as a warning for commanders of troops currently engaged in enemy-centric “anti-terrorism” operations.

## Overview of the Conflict

Rhodesia was founded in 1890 by Cecil Rhodes when he tried to assert British dominance over Southern Africa. In 1923, it became a self-governing territory within the British Empire. After World War II, white settlers tried to cling to power, even though Great Britain granted independence to its colonies under the principle of majority rule. Rhodesia, Great Britain, and African nationalists could not agree on a solution, so Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith issued the Unilateral Declaration of Independence on 11 November 1965. This kept political and economic power in white hands, sparking African resistance in the formation of two political groups: the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), led by Joshua Nkomo, and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) under Ndabaningi Sithole. The Zimbabwe African People's Union was supported by the Ndebele tribe, which included about 19 percent of Rhodesia's 4.8 million blacks. The Zimbabwe African National Union was backed by the Shona tribe, which constituted almost 80 percent of the African population. The rest of Rhodesia consisted of around 230,000 whites, 9,000 Asians, and 15,000 people of mixed ethnicity.<sup>1</sup>

When Smith issued the Unilateral Declaration of Independence, ZAPU and ZANU went on the offensive through their armed wings, the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) and the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA). They infiltrated Rhodesia from Zambia from

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PHOTO: Jubilant demonstrators celebrate the removal of colonialism by flogging the statue of Rhodesia's founder, Cecil John Rhodes, 31 July 1980. (AP Photo/Louis Gubb).

1966 through 1968. Since they did so in large groups, the Rhodesian security forces quickly detected and engaged them. By late 1968, the death rate was 160 insurgents for 12 security force members. The guerrillas failed to establish a base in Rhodesia, and the survivors fled back to Zambia.<sup>2</sup>

After these raids, ZANLA adopted a Maoist approach, aided by Chinese advisers. It planned to avoid direct confrontations with the security forces and gradually extend control over the countryside. This changed the pattern of war in the early 1970s, when ZANLA began to establish control over African rural life. Its strategic aim was to overextend the security forces so that the white economy would collapse as large numbers of reservists were mobilized. An alliance with the Mozambican guerrilla group FRELIMO permitted ZANLA to infiltrate Rhodesia, especially after this group became the legal government in 1975 following Mozambican independence from Portugal.<sup>3</sup> ZANLA then flooded Rhodesia with guerrillas. In January 1976, there were an estimated 1,600 present within Rhodesia. By mid-1977, there were 6,000. Near the end of the war, ZANLA deployed around 10,000 fighters in Rhodesia while holding 3,500 in reserve abroad.

By then, ZIPRA had infiltrated about 4,000 men and held back 16,000 trained fighters.<sup>4</sup> Rather than taking a Maoist approach, ZAPU's military wing received advice and aid from the Soviet Union and hoped for a decisive battle.<sup>5</sup>

In the end, ZANLA's strategy proved successful. The security forces lost control over large swaths of the country. The increased mobilizations and defense spending harmed the economy and motivated a significant number of whites to emigrate. By late 1979, Rhodesia was on its last legs.<sup>6</sup> Even an internal settlement in which whites shared power with the non-Marxist, African Bishop Muzorewa did not bring peace, because neither the insurgent groups nor the international community recognized his government. In December 1979, Great Britain, Rhodesia, ZANU, and ZAPU reached an agreement in London over majority rule elections. In March 1980, ZANU, by then led by Robert Mugabe, won the elections.

## **A Punitive Strategy**

The Rhodesian security forces embraced a punitive approach to counterinsurgency. Apart from

some attempts at population control, there was no program to win over the African population by positive measures. The army focused on achieving a high "kill rate."<sup>7</sup> It became skillful at this; even with its outdated equipment the Rhodesian Army killed over 10,000 guerrillas inside Rhodesia and thousands outside it, and it lost only 1,361 service members between December 1972 and December 1979.<sup>8</sup> This article illustrates how Rhodesian soldiers first embraced the kill-rate strategy and subsequently took it one step further to the extent that it actually had detrimental effects on the way the political and military leaders wanted to conduct the war.

Existing studies on the background of this punitive approach explain that its underlying reason was that the Unilateral Declaration of Independence aimed to preserve a privileged position for whites. Rhodesians were never willing to give up this position sufficiently to win over the Africans.<sup>9</sup> An approach such as Great Britain used in Malaya, with improvements to the situation of the ethnic Chinese and the promise of Malayan independence, was therefore not feasible. What remained was the use of force to kill insurgents in a strategy of attrition.

Ideological blinders reinforced this path. White Rhodesians lived under the false impression that their country's blacks were "the happiest in Africa."<sup>10</sup> They further believed that most Africans only understood and respected force.<sup>11</sup> In that sense, Rhodesia still reasoned the same as British Colonel Charles Callwell advised in his late nineteenth century study of colonial wars.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Rhodesians believed that most Africans were incapable of developing political ideas or forming effective organizations. Therefore, they reasoned, the war was not the product of domestic injustices, but of outside communist agitators directed by China and the Soviet Union. The goal of the war became to eliminate these "intruders." This interpretation also fit in with Rhodesia's reluctance to share power or resources with blacks.<sup>13</sup> In the 1960s, the strategy actually worked. The army could track down and deal with infiltrations that took place in large groups far from populated areas. This initial success reinforced white Rhodesia's belief in its military superiority. Even ZANLA's turn toward Maoist revolutionary warfare did not

immediately cause Rhodesia such problems that it revised its strategy. Until FRELIMO took over in Mozambique, ZANLA could not expand beyond the underdeveloped northeast of Rhodesia. The war then reached a stalemate.<sup>14</sup> However, from 1976 onward, the punitive approach became fatal. ZANLA flooded the country with guerrillas, while Rhodesia could neither offer an attractive political solution to the African population nor achieve a kill rate higher than ZANLA's recruitment and infiltration rates.<sup>15</sup>



Guerrillas who fought a prolonged war rejoice as they leave the stadium where independence celebrations were held, Salisbury, Rhodesia, 18 April 1980.

(AP Photo/Matt Franjola)

## Soldiers' Training

Infantry training immersed Rhodesian recruits in the enemy-centric approach. The program aimed at making the recruits adept at killing insurgents. It consisted of six weeks basic training, six weeks conventional warfare training, and five weeks in what we now call counterinsurgency (COIN) training. This last phase trained the recruits in aggressive bush fighting. They learned to snaphoot at moving targets with the “double tap” technique (two single shots fired in rapid succession to overcome the recoil of the rifle), lay and react to ambushes, and disembark from a helicopter. They also learned survival skills.<sup>16</sup> In the 1960s, the program had been slightly different, with less emphasis on COIN, but more emphasis on physical fitness and weapon skills.<sup>17</sup>

Another goal was to make soldiers aggressive fighters. This took place explicitly in exercises where recruits had to charge at sandbags with a bayonet while swearing.<sup>18</sup> One former recruit suggests that it also took place implicitly over the course of the entire training program. Moreover, abusive instructors caused anger and resentment among the recruits, which they released on the enemy.<sup>19</sup> Some suggest that these same techniques were used in American training during the Vietnam era.<sup>20</sup>

Several aspects were notably absent during basic training. Most prominently lacking was

training on the treatment of civilians and the value of intelligence. The Rhodesian COIN manual did mention the importance of good civil-military relations (especially for intelligence gathering), the value of prisoners for intelligence purposes, and the importance and difficulties of establishing observation posts in rural areas.<sup>21</sup> This is not surprising since contemporary British COIN specialist Sir Robert Thompson wrote the same. Various high-ranking Rhodesian officers had also fought in the Malayan Emergency from which Thompson drew his lessons.<sup>22</sup> The absence of these themes during basic training is even more remarkable in the light of how Rhodesia organized its war effort. Most patrols consisted of a four-man “stick” or an eight-man “call sign,” led by a private or corporal. These units had to maintain civil-military relations, take prisoners, and gather intelligence on the ground. Despite the importance the manual attached to these things, soldiers' training focused on the killing part of COIN.

## Punitive Combat Deployment: Fire Force and External Raids

Combat deployment further strengthened the soldiers' enemy-centric experience of war. The quintessential example of this was the fire force, a Rhodesian invention to deploy scarce manpower in an aggressive role. When guerrillas were sighted—usually by the multiracial Selous Scouts dressed as insurgents—Alouette helicopters and, later,

Dakota planes flew in troops to box in the enemy.<sup>23</sup> Initially, white regulars of the Rhodesian Light Infantry manned the fire forces. With the expansion of the war, black soldiers under white officers of the Rhodesian African Rifles and white reservists of the Rhodesia Regiments also participated. The fact that Rhodesian intelligence attributed 68 percent of insurgent deaths inside Rhodesia to the Scouts, who usually let the fire force do the killing, indicates the important role of the concept.<sup>24</sup>

The war diary of a Rhodesian African Rifles company commander, Captain André Dennison, clearly indicates how the fire force changed the soldiers' experience of war. From 11 July to 22 August 1978, his company carried out regular patrols, killing three insurgents and capturing one. Its prior deployment, from 16 May to 27 June, as fire force, resulted in 37 guerrillas killed and four captured. Their next stint as fire force, from 5 September to 17 October 1978, yielded 72 killed guerrillas and six captured.<sup>25</sup>

Fire force troopers possessed the tactical initiative and carried out an aggressive fight against the enemy. This was important because, as one soldier described, "The more contacts there were, the higher the morale rose, because there were tangible

results for all the effort and it was felt that something constructive was being achieved." When it was quiet, troopers became bored and annoyed with army regulations, and morale dropped.<sup>26</sup>

Cross-border raids were the second type of enemy-centric deployment. When the war escalated, Rhodesia mounted operations into Zambia and Mozambique to strike at insurgent bases and harass infiltration routes. Initially, the Special Air Service, Scouts, and Rhodesian Light Infantry carried out the raids, but later the Rhodesia Regiments participated as well. One reservist even described a 10-day patrol 70 kilometers into Mozambique.<sup>27</sup> Soldiers were generally positive about conducting cross-border operations. Just as in fire force duty, operations aimed at a high kill rate and yielded tangible results. Cross-border raids thus corresponded to the Rhodesian perception of the war. During campfire talks, soldiers frequently argued that they should strike at foreign bases. They felt frustrated when such actions were put on hold for fear of negative reactions from the international community.<sup>28</sup> Rhodesian Light Infantry troopers also liked the cross-border raids because they confirmed their status as elite soldiers. They heard stories from the old guard who had fought with the Portuguese



(AP Photo/J. Ross Baughman)

Rhodesian cavalymen detain a black Rhodesian for questioning, Lupane, Southern Rhodesia, September 1977.

in Mozambique and longed for similar action. Rhodesian Light Infantry troopers felt honored to be briefed together with the Special Air Service.<sup>29</sup>

## Other Internal Operations

When not on fire force duty, troops engaged in other tasks that further strengthened their enemy-centric understanding of the war. Among these were ambushes and larger sweep operations aimed solely at killing insurgents. Protection and administration of protected villages, where peasants were forcibly resettled to isolate insurgents from the population, fell under the responsibility of the separate Guard Force.<sup>30</sup> Rhodesian soldiers never engaged in the pacification and development of a specific area.

The only internal task not directly aimed at killing was intelligence gathering. However, this had such meager results that it probably did not influence the soldiers' perceptions of the war. The early-warning network of *mujibas* (teenage insurgent sympathizers) and the white soldiers' limited knowledge of the local environment created almost insurmountable problems.<sup>31</sup> Only the Scouts seem to have had the necessary special training and local knowledge to man observation posts effectively.<sup>32</sup> Dennison's war diary clearly shows the meager results of observation posts and random ambushes of wells and deserted guerrilla camps. Even though his company consisted largely of Africans, the deployment led to only three insurgents killed and one captured in return for two casualties. The contacts that took place were mostly ambushes initiated by guerrillas. The next deployment, from 5 September until 17 October, was again as fire force, and resulted in 72 killed and 6 captured for 4 troops wounded.<sup>33</sup> Patrols encountered similar problems because of the "*mujiba*" network and unfamiliarity of the region.<sup>34</sup> Intelligence gathering by nonspecialized units was thus not very effective and unlikely to change the impression of the war as being about killing opponents in aggressive combat.

## Beer, Boots, and Vietnam

More factors than tangible military results influenced the soldiers' preference for punitive action. The men did not have to spend nights in the cold while living off rations. Instead, they slept on stretchers and enjoyed cold beer and freshly prepared food.<sup>35</sup> During the day they were on standby

and could play cards rather than walk long distances as infantrymen. A territorial soldier used to such foot patrols was delighted with his deployment in a fire force for precisely these reasons.<sup>36</sup>

Another advantage of fire force was the chance to loot dead guerrillas. A fair number of them carried money, so troopers searched the corpses immediately after a fight. The troopers prized Tokarev pistols, which they could sell for a high price on the black market.<sup>37</sup> They also searched for useful gear—such as webbing, water bottles, and even boots—to replace their inferior Rhodesian-issued material.<sup>38</sup>

The presence of veterans from the Vietnam War further influenced Rhodesian soldiers. An estimated 1,400 foreigners served in Rhodesia throughout the war, often with the Rhodesian Light Infantry.<sup>39</sup> The number of American or Australian Vietnam veterans in the region is unknown, but most Rhodesian soldiers seem to have been in touch with at least one at some point.<sup>40</sup> These veterans had fought a war in which the "body count" was seen as the index of success.<sup>41</sup> This was essentially the same as the Rhodesian "kill rate." Vietnam veterans were usually well received in Rhodesia, and Rhodesian soldiers were often interested in their experiences.<sup>42</sup> Most likely, the Vietnam veterans strengthened the Rhodesian soldiers' punitive focus. Substantiating how influential the Vietnam veterans were is difficult, but soldiers' slang offers a clue. At the beginning of the war, insurgents were referred to as "terrorists," a term that other Rhodesians used throughout the war.<sup>43</sup> In the late 1970s soldiers began to call insurgents "*gooks*."<sup>44</sup> This was the same term some Americans in Vietnam used to refer to their opponents.<sup>45</sup> One network of infiltration routes frequently used by ZANLA was also called the "Ho Chi Minh Trail," after the route used by the North Vietnamese to infiltrate the South.<sup>46</sup>

## The Punitive Approach One Step Further: Execution of Prisoners

The soldiers' preference for killing insurgents did not undermine the war effort. The kill rate was perhaps not a fruitful method to win the war, but Rhodesia's leaders had designed the kill rate strategy, so the soldiers' preference for punitive action was execution of the national strategy on the

tactical level. On the ground, however, the soldiers embraced the punitive approach so wholeheartedly that it became a goal in itself and harmed plans of higher authorities.

The frequent execution of surrendering or wounded insurgents is the clearest example of this. According to Thompson, gathering intelligence is of paramount importance in counter-insurgency. It allows security forces to eliminate the insurgent underground network and achieve a high kill rate. The main sources of information are agents, informers, and captured opponents and documents.<sup>47</sup> In 1960s' Rhodesia, it was indeed the informer network of Police Special Branch that detected most infiltrating guerrillas.<sup>48</sup> However, by 1972, ZANLA had politicized the population and destroyed the informer network in northeastern Rhodesia.<sup>49</sup> Breathing new life into this network while at war proved difficult.<sup>50</sup>

As a result, taking prisoners became vital to the war effort. Together with captured documents, it was the first way of obtaining intelligence. The fact that the insurgents often talked after capture helped the British in Malaya.<sup>51</sup> This seems to have also been the case in Rhodesia.<sup>52</sup> The information extracted from prisoners was indeed vital for planning attacks on insurgent camps.<sup>53</sup> The problem with prisoners and documents was that they only revealed old information. To gather fresher intelligence that could lead to killing insurgents inside Rhodesia, the army founded the Selous Scouts in 1974. They posed as insurgents to obtain information from villagers on the guerrilla presence and reconnoiter without "*mujibas*" raising the alarm. Then they captured the insurgents themselves or called in a fire force. To function, the pseudo-concept required a constant flow of information on insurgent habits, watchwords, training, and organization.<sup>54</sup> Prisoners thus became vital to the Rhodesian intelligence effort.

However, ordinary Rhodesian soldiers often executed wounded or surrendering guerrillas. The Rhodesian Light Infantry and African Rifles were mainly involved in this, because as fire forces they had the most contacts. In the Rhodesian Light Infantry, the execution of wounded enemy was almost standard operating procedure. Dennis Croukamp, who served in the Light Infantry before and after a stint with the Scouts, says that

Light Infantry platoon commanders usually shot wounded or surrendering guerrillas. Most of them knew that people higher up needed and wanted prisoners, but they simply chose to ignore this.<sup>55</sup>

Prisoner execution took place in other units as well. In 45 months, Dennison's African Rifles Company killed 364 insurgents and captured only 39.<sup>56</sup> The most likely explanation for this discrepancy is that the men were not inclined to take prisoners. That insurgents took their wounded with them after a fight is an unlikely explanation. Their favorite countermeasure against fire forces was to run off in all directions.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the number of weapons captured usually coincided roughly with the number of kills and captives.<sup>58</sup> Guerrillas likely did not take anything but their own gear when fleeing because the fire force shot the wounded. A reservist also mentioned how a captain encouraged the execution of prisoners.<sup>59</sup>

Apart from personal consideration, there were some general motives behind all this. Although racism undoubtedly played a role, a strong ideological commitment to the Rhodesian cause was not a precondition. Some of the Rhodesian Light Infantry troopers cited above were not strong ideological supporters of the Rhodesian cause.<sup>60</sup> This was even clearer in the case of the African Rifles soldiers who were in the army mostly for the economic opportunity. Nevertheless, it is likely that the general framework through which Rhodesians perceived the war paved the ground for the executions. In their eyes, the enemy consisted of "communist terrorists" from abroad who infiltrated peaceful Rhodesia, home of the "happiest blacks in Africa." Shooting someone thought of as a "terrorist" was probably easier for troopers than shooting a peasant disaffected with Rhodesia's racial and social inequities. Training, with its focus on aggressive bush fighting, reinforced this framework.

The intensification of the war hardened these attitudes. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Rhodesian Light Infantry troopers had accompanied the Portuguese Army in Mozambique. One of these men mentioned how the Portuguese habit of executing prisoners shocked the Rhodesians, but later they did exactly the same.<sup>61</sup> Another soldier, when complaining about an order to give first aid to wounded guerrillas, said his sergeant probably

did not know yet how dirty the war was, and that their opponents would never consider treating a wounded Rhodesian soldier.<sup>62</sup> Given the fact that the opinion of Rhodesian society hardened as well toward the end of the war, it is likely that many reservists experienced feelings similar to those of the regulars.<sup>63</sup>

Another reason for executing prisoners rather than holding them captive was the low regard Rhodesian soldiers had of the intelligence community. Special Branch was in many ways a peacetime police organization that had trouble providing the operational intelligence the army needed.<sup>64</sup> Letting Special Branch handle intelligence had worked well for the British in Malaya, but it exchanged qualified liaison officers with the army.<sup>65</sup> In Rhodesia, the army often used the few existing intelligence posts to get rid of incompetent officers.<sup>66</sup> Only when individuals of both organizations cooperated closely on a permanent basis, such as in the Scouts,

did the situation improve.<sup>67</sup> Croukamp rated the intelligence he received with the Scouts much higher than intelligence he received with the Rhodesian Light Infantry. Other soldiers expressed a similar opinion.<sup>68</sup> Apart from the merits of Special Branch, it seems that the lack of emphasis on intelligence during training also contributed to this reluctance to comply with intelligence requests.

Another reason for the executions was a practical one. Captives, wounded or not, could still escape or resist, so the troopers had to guard them. Since the Rhodesians fought in four-man sticks, it was hardly possible to leave someone behind as a guard. After contact, troopers had to carry wounded prisoners to a suitable helicopter-landing zone, making the stick vulnerable to ambushes. Troopers often found it easier to execute a prisoner. Prisoners took up valuable space in the Alouette, which could only transport four men. This would mean that the troopers had to stay out overnight rather than enjoy a cold beer at the base.<sup>69</sup>

Toward the end of the war, with the internal settlement in sight, and even more so when the Lancaster House talks started, soldiers realized that prisoners might gain their release under amnesty programs. Consequently, some killed surrendering guerrillas in the field and held captive only an officer who could reveal the most valuable intelligence.<sup>70</sup> This execution of prisoners at the time of the amnesty program was not only harmful to intelligence gathering, but also hampered the political solution Rhodesia tried to achieve with the backing of black prime minister Muzorewa. Rhodesia hoped that Muzorewa would make Africans acquiesce in a society in which the whites retained a privileged position and convince the international community to lift the sanctions imposed after the Unilateral Declaration of Independence. One of the main ways to show that Muzorewa had genuine popular support and could end the war was an amnesty program to create a government militia of former guerrillas. Either because Muzorewa did not appeal to the rebels or because of the strict control these organizations enforced over their members, the scheme's implementation was problematic.<sup>71</sup> Captured insurgents, fully under government control, would have been an ideal recruitment pool. The frequent executions by the men on the ground prevented this.



(AP Photo/Zuheir Saade)

**Zimbabwe Prime Minister Robert Mugabe speaks during a press conference at Bintumani Hotel, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 4 July 1980.**

## Violence Toward Civilians

Violence against civilians also supports the thesis that soldiers adopted and extended the punitive approach to counterinsurgency. About 19,000 African civilians died in the war. Partly this was a result of insurgent actions. They used force against uncooperative civilians, used them as cover, and targeted the rural health and veterinary services. This later caused a surge of malaria, rabies, and tsetse flies. As the war intensified, the government allowed more violence against black civilians. This punitive approach had started in 1973 with the imposition of fines on communities that aided insurgents. Brutalities against civilians were not yet accepted, but in the late 1970s Rhodesia used the term “killed in crossfire” rather liberally.<sup>72</sup> There was never a clear and uniform policy targeting civilians though. Actually, the cabinet always pushed for a tougher approach, while General Walls, Rhodesia’s most senior military official, tried to limit the freedom Ian Smith wanted to give him. At one point Smith, supported by several cabinet members, even proposed to abandon the “Queensbury Rules of waging warfare” and impose nationwide martial law. Walls retorted that if the cabinet really wanted that, it should resign and let him rule the country at the head of a military junta.<sup>73</sup>

In this climate, soldiers had greater freedom to stretch the rules. The reporting of a significant number of “killed in crossfire” was now accepted, while in the early 1970s Special Branch still treated each death as regular police work.<sup>74</sup> One soldier probably described the new attitude accurately: “If in doubt, shoot. It kept you alive.” He, for example, opened fire on a hut if he saw an insurgent hiding amidst civilians. Soldiers also disclosed that they shot at unidentified figures running at a distance.<sup>75</sup> Dennison’s war diary gives some idea of the number of civilians killed this way. Between 29 November 1975 and 28 July 1979, his company killed 364 insurgents and captured 39 while killing 170 civilians (the number of wounded civilians is not recorded).<sup>76</sup>

Interestingly enough, soldiers did not consciously execute government policy when they targeted civilians. The above-mentioned soldier who shot to stay alive thought that higher-ranking officers tried to adhere to the Geneva Conventions

while “the troops in the field tended to sneer at the idea.”<sup>77</sup> Another soldier explained how troops beat up uncooperative civilians to extract information. Such treatment was actually illegal, and usually ineffective, but often happened.<sup>78</sup> An instructor also told Rhodesian Light Infantry recruits that if a civilian saw him on a cross-border operation, he would kill the person so there was less risk of compromising the mission. He would never do this in Rhodesia, because there, “the Rule of Law applied.”<sup>79</sup> Given this notion among soldiers that the killing of civilians was illegal, we cannot explain the large number of persons killed in crossfires as government policy. It was probably another manifestation of Rhodesian soldiers embracing a punitive approach toward counterinsurgency and taking it one step further than (they thought) was allowed, by showing little regard for civilian lives.

## Attempts to Wreck the Peace

Some soldiers embraced the punitive approach so enthusiastically that they wanted to fight on after Mugabe’s electoral victory. Initially, there was “Operation Quartz,” a counter-coup designed by the higher echelon of the security forces in case Mugabe lost the election and decided to resume the war. With South African support, the air force, Special Air Service, Selous Scouts, and Rhodesian Light Infantry would take out ZANU’s leaders and the guerrillas at the ceasefire assembly points. This was supposed to set back ZANLA’s war effort 20 years, after which ZAPU would be invited to join a coalition government. Many junior officers and NCOs who knew of the plan either hoped or wanted it to be a preemptive coup. This did not happen because both Muzorewa and General Walls refused to lend their support to it when the first news of Mugabe’s victory surfaced. Rhodesia’s leaders knew that the game was up.<sup>80</sup>

Nevertheless, some soldiers were so determined to fight that they wanted to initiate a coup themselves. That these were the men of the Rhodesian Light Infantry is perhaps not surprising, given that they were employed primarily in the punitive fire force. In Algeria, paratroopers flown to battle by helicopter and used in a similar fashion as the fire forces turned against the French government in 1960 and 1961.<sup>81</sup> One Rhodesian





(AP Photo/Eddie Adams)

Rhodesian children peer from their makeshift quarters in the Harare refugee camp set up next to a bus station in Salisbury, Rhodesia, 17 April 1979.

Light Infantry platoon commander who knew that the coup was off instructed his men to provoke celebrating Africans. He told them that if the people responded with aggression, they should shoot and hope to ignite a renewal of the war. Yet despite actions by the soldiers, such as spitting and urinating on the masses, the people did not respond, so the troops returned to their barracks.<sup>82</sup>

A Rhodesian Light Infantry unit on guard at the Rhodesia Broadcasting Studios was probably even closer to provoking a resumption of hostilities. After his electoral victory, Mugabe arrived with a few bodyguards to address the nation in a television speech. Many of the young troopers voiced a desire to kill him, but in the end, the commander decided against it. He feared that the army command would withhold support and regard them as traitors. Later the commander discovered that one of his men was missing. He found the man inside the studio complex with a hand grenade, waiting for the opportune moment to take out Mugabe.<sup>83</sup>

Since only about a dozen Rhodesian veterans have committed their experiences to paper, other similar events probably took place. If one of those had taken a slightly different turn, a violent reaction by Mugabe's supporters against whites could have resulted. This would have forced Walls or other security force commanders to activate "Operation Quartz," and possibly provided a *casus belli* for South African intervention. After Mugabe's victory, Pretoria stationed a battle group near the Zimbabwean border. The plan was for South African and Rhodesian Special Forces to plant bombs during Mugabe's inauguration. This would have killed the new prime minister and Prince Charles. Angry ZANLA supporters would then turn against Rhodesia's whites. To prevent a massacre, South Africa could then intervene, without protests by a United Kingdom shocked about the death of the heir-apparent and concerned for the safety of the many white Rhodesians with British passports. After the invasion, South Africa hoped to join forces with

ZIPRA to wipe out ZANLA and install Nkomo as a black leader beholden to Pretoria. The plan did not materialize because Rhodesia's Central Intelligence Organization got wind of it and expelled the special forces.<sup>84</sup> A spontaneous action from the lower ranks, such as the the assassination attempts described above, would probably have been equally effective in sparking violence toward whites and setting the machine in motion.

## Insights

Rhodesia fought a strongly punitive and enemy-centric counterinsurgency. Strategy focused on the kill rate, which the soldiers embraced wholeheartedly. In a sense, this worked well because the troops remained motivated to kill insurgents up until the end of the war, even under a black prime minister and against a tsunami of infiltrating insurgents.

The downside of the kill focus was that Rhodesian soldiers embraced it so fully that they began to employ it irrespective of higher orders. In that way, violence on the ground acquired its own dynamism and in fact became an independent process only partially controlled by higher authorities. The penchant to kill resulted in the frequent execution of prisoners, which hampered Rhodesia's intelligence effort, something existing studies of the war often overlook.<sup>85</sup> It was also visible in the attempts to wreck the peace, which, if successful, would have distorted Rhodesia's political and the military elite's plans to end the war.

The behavior of Rhodesian soldiers gives insights into soldiers' actions in guerrilla wars. Several recent books have studied what motivates actors to take sides in such wars. Stathis Kalyvas, in his study on violence in civil war, points out the importance of actors joining the side that appears to have de facto control over an area. This presents an opportunity for people to settle private disputes by aligning with this force and denouncing those they dislike. The party that controls an area therefore determines people's allegiance. Daniel Branch, in his study of loyalists during the Kenyan Mau Mau War, regards British control as the "trigger" for loyalism and the opportunity to gain access to labor and land as a key "sustainer." Norma Kriger suggested something similar to Kalyvas about

African peasants in Rhodesia when she argues that the disempowered (such as youth in the age-based village hierarchy) supported ZANLA insurgents to change their situation. This article shows that for government soldiers the simple desire to continue an enemy-centric and punitive approach can become a motivating factor in itself.<sup>86</sup>

This is something that should be a warning for the Western coalition's effort in Afghanistan. That war has always had a strong focus on killing Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters, especially during the early years of the conflict. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld opposed nationbuilding and wanted to show that the United States could fight wars relying on elite units and technology. Therefore he took away control of Special Forces from regional commanders in the hope they would mount more aggressive operations in the hunt for terrorists.<sup>87</sup> Later, U.S. opposition to nationbuilding changed, and in 2006, U.S.-led coalition forces deployed throughout the country to create a stable Afghan nation.<sup>88</sup> Even so, the hunter-killer actions continued. In early 2010, President Obama even increased the number of Special Forces in Afghanistan and ordered them to continue hunting down Taliban and Al-Qaeda.<sup>89</sup>

These hunter-killer missions are not without risk. The frequent use of air support by the operators causes hundreds of civilian deaths a year. During night raids, civilians are easily mistaken for Taliban. In March 2010, ISAF commander General Stanley McCrystal took personal command of the Special Forces. He feared they were not complying with orders to minimize civilian casualties while hunting down Taliban, which undermined support for the Afghan government. These orders had already been preceded by a halt of special operations the year before to find a way to minimize civilian casualties.<sup>90</sup> Perhaps the operators found their aggressive actions more important than their commander's orders or the plan to create a viable Afghan government. It seems that what occurred in Rhodesia—where a military unit's desire for punitive action became a factor in itself—might be happening in Afghanistan too. Whether this (potential) danger is sufficiently understood is uncertain. Even retired Army Lieutenant Colonel John Nagel, a coauthor of the U.S. Army's COIN field manual,

FM 3-24, argues that when a conventional army fights a counterinsurgency war, the staffs have to change their ways of thinking and working. For ordinary soldiers, it is mostly business as usual

since their primary task still is to close with and kill the enemy.<sup>91</sup> What this article shows is that it is an unrestrained preference for killing on the part of soldiers that can imperil the war effort. **MR**

## NOTES

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