

# FIGHTING AND WRITING: THE RHODESIAN ARMY AT WAR AND POST-WAR

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For the last few years I have been writing a history of the Rhodesian army in what is called both the Zimbabwe liberation struggle and the Rhodesian bush war. Each name contains a political position. And perhaps because of those politics, there is no operational history of this war. Moreover very little from this period has been accessioned in archives in Zimbabwe. The papers of the Rhodesian Army were briefly available (2003-07) in a now defunct private museum in Britain. This project is based on those archives and many others including the United National Independence Party papers in Lusaka (pictured) and more than a decade of interviews with former soldiers. I also rely on Rhodesian war memoirs – indeed, the working title of this book is *Fighting and Writing: the Rhodesian Army at War and Post-war*. These memoirs provide a large body of literature that depict and debate the uneven and problematic processes of white rule in the 1960s and 70s that cannot be simplified as white supremacy along. The messy hodge-podge of political ideas and young soldiers' alienation and ambition seemed to require another way to think about the country's counter-insurgency. The earliest of these memoirs were hagiographical accounts of Rhodesian forces that created the imaginary of Rhodesian military might well-known in South Africa and North America, but the memoirs that followed told another history, one in which Rhodesia's soldiering was less a matter of repressing African aspirations than it was one of acknowledging African qualities. The conduct of war described in these memoirs involved what white men learned from Africans.

Rhodesian war memoirs defend a national ideal from the incursions of African guerrillas, recent white immigrants, and foreign soldiers. These writings are devoid of any sense that all whites were superior. Rhodesian-born authors complained about the racism of recent immigrants, men they believed were willing to



resort to great violence against Africans to keep the servants they never had in Britain. The foreign soldiers who came to fight for Rhodesia were small in number but large in reputation. White Rhodesian soldiers despised them: they called them mercenaries, although they were paid and taxed at local rates, and complained about their poor discipline and poorer marksmanship. An idealized Rhodesian nationality emerged in the post-war writing about the skills national servicemen brought to the war. Rhodesians claimed they were fighting for civilization, but their soldering was honed in uniquely Rhodesian childhoods. Young men recalled growing up with African playmates who taught them to hunt and track. They spoke African languages and learned African ways. Blackened-up, blue-eyed white soldiers in counter-gangs assured their readers that their knowledge of African languages and customs made for a complete masquerade, a mimicry that proved the ability of white Rhodesians to belong in Africa.

The post-war Rhodesian army is an army of authors. I count sixty war memoirs and novels in my home office alone; there are at least a dozen more on my Kindle. Most are self-published and almost all struggle to describe their wartime experience in a way that defines a specific Rhodesian nationality, one made in childhood relations and disrupted adulthood. These memoirs are a genre unto themselves. It is commonplace for authors to flesh out their memories with

secondary sources. (one even quotes me). A publisher told me that he gave some authors documents for their memoirs and excised all references to drugs from others. Many authors have revised their memoirs, publishing a second version ten or twenty years later, usually to correct another version of the war. Such revisions have brought about lawsuits between authors and publishers over copyright, plagiarism, and defamation of character. Over the course of my extended conversations with these authors and publishers I have been given copies of court transcripts, allowing me to see that the contests are not only about the war but about who has which right to describe it in which words. These memoirs thus may not fully qualify as recalled experience, but the processes of writing and publication (and litigation) reveal the complexity of the Rhodesian nation and the ways it was reconstructed over a thirty year period. In short, post-war writing made the wartime nation.

A book about white soldiers defending a pariah nation in 1970s Africa might seem at odds with the dominant trends in African studies, but this project raises questions about loyalty to colony, race and nation that overlap with deeper and broader genealogies than some of the writing in African studies has allowed.

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