

**REVOLUTIONARY WARFARE AND THE ZIMBABWE WAR OF  
LIBERATION: A STRATEGIC ANALYSIS.**

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*"The first, the supreme, the most far reaching act of judgement is for the statesman and the Commander to determine the kind of war on which they are embarking."<sup>1</sup>*

**Strategic Background**

When Prime Minister Ian Smith of Rhodesia declared Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) from Britain on November 11, 1965, little did he know that no country in the world would ever formally recognize his illegal white minority regime for the entire fifteen years of its existence.<sup>2</sup> This political act of defiance convinced the colonized blacks that the only way to attain black majority rule was through "the barrel of a gun". Robert Mugabe's response to UDI was.

*"for all those who cherish freedom and a meaningful life, UDI has set a collision course which cannot be altered. 11 November 1965 marked a turning point of the struggle for freedom in that land from a constitutional and political one to a primarily military struggle."<sup>3</sup> It sounded Clausewitzian in that the pending war was an extension of politics by other means. Viewed in Mao Tse-Tung's doctrine, this*

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, On War, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1976 pp 88-89

<sup>2</sup> It appears Ian Smith must have grossly underestimated the international response to the declaration of UDI. In his recently published memoirs, he erroneously views his Declaration of Independence to be of the same significance as the American Declaration of Independence in 1776. See Ian Douglas Smith The Great Betrayal, Blake Publishing Ltd, London, 1997, pp 104-106

<sup>3</sup> Anthony R. Wilkinson, "Insurgency in Rhodesia, 1957-1973: An Account and Assessment" in Adelphi Papers Number One Hundred The International Institute For Strategic Studies London 1973 p 8. Robert Mugabe was Secretary General of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) whose military wing was Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA). This paper examines the strategies adopted by this liberation movement as the writer was a member of ZANLA.

# Report Documentation Page

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vindicated his idea that, "*war is politics with blood and politics is war without blood.*"<sup>4</sup>

In Great Britain, Sir Dingle Foot, the Solicitor General in the British Government responded by giving an implied approval for the Africans' resort to armed struggle when his response to UDI was, that the African population had been denied all human rights and all means of political expression<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the stage was now set for the next round of the political game. This time, it was politics with blood.

What was not clear to the political and military leaders of the liberation movements at the time of starting the guerrilla campaign was the nature of war that was to be waged in pursuance of the political objective-black majority rule. Indeed, the nationalist leaders assumed that stepping up acts of sabotage and isolated attacks on police posts and remote white farms would put enough pressure on both the British government and the Smith regime to result in serious pursuit of a peaceful settlement that would address the core issues at stake.

These initial acts of sabotage only served to harden white attitudes and failed to produce the decisive action from either the British Government or the Smith regime. The "short war illusion," that was apparent among the guerrilla leadership and their cadres, led to their initial failure to fully appreciate the true nature of revolutionary warfare. This view is further corroborated by J.K. Cilliers' observation, that the insurgents' strategy during the early phases of the struggle was based on two false assumptions. First was the belief that Britain could be induced to intervene forcibly in Rhodesia should law and order seem in imminent

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<sup>4</sup> Mao Tse-Tung, Selections of Mao Tse-Tung's Writings, Foreign Languages Press, Peking 1967, p 221

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Young Rhodesia and Independence, J M Dent and Sons, London 1969 p 323

danger of collapsing.<sup>6</sup> Second was the illusion that made the nationalist leaders believe that all that was necessary was to train and arm a few guerillas and dispatch them back to Rhodesia to scare the whites and subsequently ignite a wave of civil disorder by the blacks.<sup>7</sup> The consequences of this lack of strategic appreciation of the type of war the guerrillas were embarking on resulted in some monumental tactical and political mistakes that led to a four year lull in guerrilla activities as the liberation movement reviewed its political and military strategy.<sup>8</sup>

The Rhodesian forces, for their part, anticipated the outbreak of hostilities and had sent military observers to Kenya, Malaya and Vietnam to study counter guerrilla warfare.<sup>9</sup> The supreme commander of the Rhodesian forces, Lieutenant General Peter Walls was a veteran of the Malaya campaign. Thus, at the outbreak of war in 1966, the Rhodesian forces were far more prepared for armed conflict than the freedom fighters that had little or no prior knowledge about this game. This enormous disparity in military preparedness contributed to entire groups of freedom fighters being literally wiped out in early battle encounters

The period 1968 to 1972 witnessed a deliberate and systematic approach by ZANLA to mobilize the masses, carry out reconnaissance, and build a sound logistic base to sustain future guerilla warfare in Rhodesia. By the summer of 1972, the political and tactical situation had drastically changed in favor of the Maoist guerrillas. One western analyst observed that, insurgent activities in the first half of 1973 suggest that the bitter experience (of early battle losses) led to

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<sup>6</sup> J K Cilliers Counter-Insurgency in Rhodesia, Croon Helm Ltd, Kent 1985 p 6

<sup>7</sup> D Martin and P Johnson, The Struggle for Zimbabwe, Fabes and Faber London, 1981, p 10

<sup>8</sup> There are two schools of thought that have been advanced to explain the lull of activities by ZANLA the military wing of ZANU Dumiso Dabengwa argues that ZANLA did not have enough recruits at this stage of the armed struggle hence it resorted to extensive recruitment during the period in question Josiah Tungamirai on the other hand argues convincingly that the disastrous defeats suffered on the battlefield necessitated a serious review of the entire strategy and tactics being employed resulting in the adoption of Maoist doctrine and tactics For a detailed account on this debate see,

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed account on the pre-UDI hostilities see Wilkins *op cit*, pp5-6

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* p 15

a re-appraisal of nationalist tactics and strategy, which showed a careful political preparation of the local population and adoption of classic guerrilla 'hit-and-run' attacks by small locally-based groups.<sup>10</sup>

As will be shown in subsequent paragraphs, it is not the superiority in military hardware that determines the outcome of war. Three major factors contributed to the outcome of this conflict, as we now know it. First, was the type of objective that the nationalists set themselves to achieve—simply black majority rule. Second, was the qualitative change that was realized by the adoption of Maoist doctrine and strategy by the freedom fighters and its successful implementation. Third, was the Rhodesian forces' failure to comprehend the true nature of the war they were engaged in.

After having made some serious tactical mistakes during the early years of the struggle, the nationalist leadership made a rational assessment of their military situation. They made an equally pragmatic assessment of the regional and international environment and embarked on a realistic strategy aimed at bringing the Rhodesian economy to a stand still and shattering the whites' will to resist.<sup>11</sup>

### **Political and Military Objectives**

The stated political objective for the war of liberation was the attainment of black majority rule in an independent, multiracial Zimbabwe, leading to equitable distribution of wealth among its population. This meant the removal of white political dominance, introduction of universal suffrage and subsequent black economic empowerment. At the core of the conflict was the problem of land redistribution. This was both a social and economic cause that was emotionally

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<sup>10</sup> Cilliers Op Cit pp 13-74

<sup>11</sup> Gann p 105

appealing to the black peasant farmers whose land had been confiscated by European settlers during the early decades of colonization. The importance of these objectives to the suffering black majority would determine their degree of commitment in the prosecution of the war. It can also be argued that the genuine plight of the Africans, and the simplicity of our stated political objective, won the combatants a lot of sympathizers from most peace loving nations.<sup>12</sup>

Herbert Chitepo<sup>13</sup> outlined the military objective as follows:

*The strategic aim... is to attenuate the enemy forces by causing their deployment over the whole country. The subsequent mobilization of a large number of civilians from industry, business, and agriculture would have a psychologically devastating effect on the morale of the Whites, most of whom had come to Zimbabwe, lured by the prospect of the easy, privileged life promised by the regime.*<sup>14</sup>

Since war is about a clash of opposing wills, the nationalists' strategy was geared towards weakening the resolve of the adversary to continue with the military campaign, as his economic and manpower base was seriously shaken. By 1973, the short war illusion had disappeared. Cadres were mentally prepared for a long protracted struggle in which a combination of military effort and diplomatic pressure would be brought to bare on the Smith regime to compliment the effects of UN economic sanctions.

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<sup>12</sup> The two liberation movements received enormous support from NGOs, UN Agencies, and groups of individuals who donated aid to alleviate the plight of the refugees in neighboring countries. Since the guerilla movements controlled the refugee camps, it was inevitable that such donations were shared among the freedom fighters and the potential recruits languishing in refugee camps. Aid came in the form of food, clothes, medicine, shelter, vehicles etc

<sup>13</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

Prime Minister Ian Smith was rather too optimistic to expect that his small white minority population<sup>15</sup> could withstand the mounting political and economic pressure from the international community. The United Nations, Organization of African Unity, as well as individual member states played a critical role in bringing pressure to bare on the illegal regime. Worse still, the violence in Rhodesia was becoming a difficult menace for his regime to contain. His racial policies precluded the possibility of recruiting large numbers of blacks to fight against the liberation movements.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Ian Smith had made history, as his regime became the first victim of UN sponsored mandatory economic sanctions since the formation of the international organization. Collectively these organizations put enormous pressure both directly and indirectly on the British Government to continue seeking a peaceful settlement in Rhodesia. It was in Britain's long term strategic and economic interests to maintain a harmonious Commonwealth. Such relations were dependent on how Britain handled the Rhodesian crisis.

During the Cold War, it was difficult for the Security Council to agree on such sensitive issues as UN mandatory sanctions. When it came to the Rhodesian crisis, the UN vote was almost unanimous in support of the introduction of punitive economic sanctions. There are a number of theories that have been advanced to explain the behavior of the big powers on the question of Rhodesian sanctions. First, it is important to note that it was Britain, a member of the Security Council, that brought the Rhodesian issue for debate. It did so under pressure from Commonwealth and OAU member states. The United States endorsed the British motion hoping, as the British did, that sanctions were going to bring the Smith regime to its knees in a matter of weeks or months. France

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<sup>15</sup> The white minority population never exceeded one percent of the black populations

<sup>16</sup> M J Chinyanganya, *Military and Strategic Outcomes in Southern Africa: The Problems of Racially Oriented Policies. A Comparative Analysis of the Rhodesian and South African War Efforts*, unpublished Msc Thesis University of Zimbabwe 1998 p

abstained from voting. China and the Soviet Union were naturally expected to support such a move as the two countries identified themselves with liberation movements across the world. Second, Ian Smith argues that the USA agreed to support the British motion for mandatory sanctions on condition that Britain supported the US "adventures" in Vietnam.<sup>17</sup> Third, it is considered that since the USA was going through some rough period of civil rights activism in the mid-1960s, it was only prudent for the administration to publicly oppose UDI in fear of antagonizing the Black American civil right movement. In addition, the USA was a strong proponent of decolonization since the end of World War II-hence its support for the imposition of mandatory economic sanctions. Whatever the correct interpretation of these events, the decision to impose mandatory economic sanctions was indeed a morale booster for the liberation movements, leading to the euphoric miscalculation that a few skirmishes would compliment the effects of sanctions and bring about an early end to the hostilities.

Ian Smith took advantage of the communist rhetoric by the political leaders<sup>18</sup> of the liberation struggle to rally support from South Africa, Portugal and some western democracies opposed to the spread of communism outside the immediate periphery of the Soviet Union. His appeal for defense against the spread of communism had the potential of internationalizing the conflict in Rhodesia. Diplomatic pressure by the political leadership of the armed struggle

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<sup>17</sup> Smith, Op Cit pp 113-114 He does not elaborate the details of such a diplomatic deal However he believe that this was part of the grand conspiracy plan the western powers had against his regimes

<sup>18</sup> A vivid assessment by a Committee On Foreign Affairs U S House of Representatives June 1979, concluded that both Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo the two leaders of the liberation movements were **not** devout communists at heart The ZAPU leader Joshua Nkomo was assessed as, "*a preternatural pragmatist- more committed to the needs of nationalism than to dictates of ideology* " Robert Mugabe the leader of ZANU was assessed as "*a devout Roman Catholic who when quizzed about his knowledge of the communist catechism, was considered ideologically underving of Soviet support* " See Rhodesia Where Do We Go From Here? Report Of A Study Mission To Rhodesia, Zambia Tanzania Botswana and South Africa April 13-20 1979, p 5



and worldwide condemnation of the Smith regime averted big powers' direct confrontation in Rhodesia.<sup>19</sup>

South Africa was then considered the main custodian of western interests in the region and she did actively support the Rhodesians in their war effort. A day after UDI, the South African Premier, Dr Verwoerd, announced that it was his government's policy to promote friendship with all neighboring governments, including Rhodesia with which it had established the closest relationship. In that regard, South Africa would refrain from participating in Anglo-Rhodesian dispute and from intervening in such measures as economic boycotts.<sup>20</sup> Prior to détente,<sup>21</sup> South Africa's guarantee for military support led the Smith regime to be arrogant when it came to exploring a negotiated settlement.

### **The Local Environment**

" **Not in a thousand years!**" would the blacks in Rhodesia rule themselves declared Ian Smith. This statement from Prime Minister Ian Smith had far reaching consequences on the conduct and outcome of the war of liberation. On the one hand, this statement galvanized the resolve among the whites in Rhodesia and South Africa that Black majority rule was not an option whatsoever towards resolving the conflict in Rhodesia. On the other hand, the moderate blacks (the doves) who were originally opposed to violent means of attaining

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<sup>19</sup> The real danger of big powers' involvement was soon after the collapse of the Portuguese Empire in 1975 that led to massive Soviet and Cuban involvement in Angola and to a limited extent in Mozambique. The withdrawal of Portugal from its colonies drastically changed the geo-strategic and geo-political situation in the region. Henry Kissinger stepped up diplomatic maneuvers to compliment the British effort to in a bid to avert superpower direct confrontation in the southern African region.

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed account on South Africa's response to the crisis see, Muriel Horrell, *Days of Crisis in Rhodesia*

Johannesburg: South Africa Institute of Race Relations, 1965, pp 39-46

<sup>21</sup> The détente arrived at between the Super Powers, was equally extended to the Rhodesian conflict when Secretary of State Henry Kissinger convinced the South African leadership to withdraw their military and financial support from Ian Smith in order to force him to seriously explore a peaceful settlement.

independence became dumb founded as the agitators for waging war (the hawks) considered them to be fence seaters or outright sellouts.

Prime Minister Ian Smith's infamous statement came at a time when winds of change were sweeping across the continent of Africa. Scores of African and other colonized territories across the world were gaining independence yet there was Ian Smith declaring that there would never be an independent Zimbabwe in a thousand years. Ian Smith's uncompromising statement, coupled with the effects of UN sanctions which hurt blacks more than whites, fuelled the resolve among the black youths to flood the refugee camps across the Rhodesian borders in search of weapons to fight the white minority regime.<sup>22</sup> The chances of one getting decent employment after high school or university education were very slim as a result of economic sanctions and racial practices in the allocation of good jobs. One could not imagine living with such a desperate situation for generations when other Africans were becoming independent in neighboring countries. Thus, during the later part of the armed struggle in Zimbabwe, especially after the adoption of Maoist doctrine and strategy, problems associated with the recruitment of young men and women to fill in the ranks of freedom fighters became a thing of the past.

The real challenge facing the commanders and political leaders during the struggle was how to adequately equip, feed, clothe and provide health services to thousands of potential freedom fighters languishing in refugee camps in neighboring countries. The solution lay in taking maximum advantage of the bipolar conflict and appeal for military assistance from whoever was willing to assist in the war of liberation.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The largest influx of voluntary recruits was experienced as from 1975 when neighboring Mozambique attained its independence

Military offers with strings attached to them were declined. Some countries offered troops to fight on behalf of the freedom fighters but such offers were not entertained in fear of internationalizing the conflict. In addition, the political leadership successfully avoided swooping colonial masters by adoption of the slogan '**we are our own liberators**'.

The Rhodesian conflict was waged against a background that African colonies had participated in the two World Wars in defense of British, Belgian and French independence against German domination. World War II had a particularly significant impact on the colonized Africans. They participated in some of the bloodiest campaigns where they witnessed for the first time their white colonial masters in a state of shock and fear. Seeing the white soldiers dying in large numbers was hitherto unimaginable to the colonized Africans. The long-term significance of this experience was that the Africans also demanded independence from their colonial masters. Where this was not granted, the resort to armed struggle was considered a viable option. This was in line with Clausewitzian thought that armed conflict is adopted as a means to impose our will on the enemy.

One single international event that strategically and qualitatively changed the course of the Zimbabwe war of liberation was the collapse of the Portuguese Empire in 1974. This resulted in the emergence of Angola and Mozambique as independent states. Mozambique opened its 1000-mile border with Rhodesia to guerrilla infiltration, a move that overstretched the Rhodesian security forces at a time when the guerrilla rear bases were being flooded with potential recruits. According to an U.S. congressional report, by 1976, Rhodesia had become southern Africa's most intractable and explosive problem. The report added that the collapse of the Portuguese Empire had raised the specter of new and

massive Cuban and Soviet involvement.<sup>24</sup> The congressional concern about the spread of communist influence in southern Africa was genuine considering the massive Soviet and Cuban build up in Angola during 1975.<sup>25</sup> Secretary of State Henry Kissinger took advantage of this opportunity and used his "personal magnetism" to help influence Ian Smith to agree to a peaceful settlement. Kissinger successfully exerted enormous pressure on the South African president to withdraw his country's military support for the Smith regime. The whole idea was to avert a situation where the guerrillas would march from the bush to the government offices armed with communist ideology and possibly with direct Cuban military involvement. The Lancaster House Agreement of 1979, was successful in doing exactly what Kissinger had set out to achieve: political freedom for the black majority and avoidance of Cuban and Soviet involvement in Rhodesia.

### **The Strategic Transformation of the Armed Struggle**

Politicization of the masses of Zimbabwe to prepare them for the protracted war of liberation took effect during the period 1968 to 1971. A serious recruitment drive was embarked on coupled with massive stockpiling of weapons and ammunitions to sustain the next phase of the campaign. Part of the transformation that took place during this period was that freedom fighters had to desist from the previous practice of targeting isolated white farmers as this tended to discredit the image of the liberation movement internationally. In addition smaller groups of combatants were introduced, as these were more difficult to be detected by the enemy. Part of the qualitative change was that the local masses were made to take a very active part in the day to day waging of

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<sup>24</sup> "Rhodesia Where Do We Go From Here?" Report of A Study Mission to Rhodesia, Mozambique, Zambia, Tanzania, Botswana and South Africa April 13-20, 1979 P 1

<sup>25</sup> For a detailed account of how events in Angola changed the American perspective of the southern African sub-region see Henry Kissinger, Years of Renewal, Simon & Schuster New York 1999, pp 903-924

the armed struggle. Freedom fighters no longer had to move around with dry rations to sustain themselves on the front. Peasant farmers and rural businessmen had to provide the combatants with all their requirements with the exemption of weapons and ammunition. The "loot"--or, rather captured cattle, money and food items from white commercial farms, banks, and isolated businesses of those who did not actively support the struggle<sup>26</sup>--were shared among the villagers and the freedom fighters. This was indeed a resemblance of a socialist society that the political rhetoric promised. While a welcome development among the peasants, it served to harden the attitude of the well-to-do blacks and whites who had a lot to lose in a communist set up.

The synergy between the political leadership of the armed struggle and the armed wing, on the one hand and the black rural population on the other hand gave the liberation war movement a strategic advantage over the adversary. This was the Clausewitzian Trinity (a close relationship between the political leadership, the military command element and the population) in practice. The lull in guerilla activities prior to 1972 can be easily explained through Mao Tse-Tung's three-stage progression towards total revolutionary warfare.

The period 1968-1972 was our "strategic defense." The emphasis had been on political mobilization of the rural peasants, before the launch of limited, defensive guerilla operations aimed primarily at the protection of the guerilla units and their bases. Pitched battles and positional warfare were avoided, as the guerilla units had to survive by adopting asymmetrical responses to the Rhodesian forces' tactical initiatives. Prime Minister Ian Smith later acknowledged that the guerrillas remained undetected for a considerable length of time: *"They were able to move backwards and forwards across the border from their so-called base camps and were thereby able to avoid detection for long enough to enable*

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<sup>26</sup> It is important to point out that the liberation struggle had a significant number of white sympathizers from all walks of life. Particularly the missionaries running mission schools and hospitals did render the armed

*them to subvert pockets of local tribesmen. Thereafter their task was made easy through shelter, food, clothing and provided by the local population”.*<sup>27</sup>

Priority targets for the guerrillas were isolated police and military outposts, economic installations, commercial centers and lines of communications. Hospitals were mobilized for medical supplies to treat both the combatants and the rural population. The overall military strategy was to wear down the enemy's capacity to continue waging war through a protracted guerilla campaign. In short, this was a strategy of attrition. The country was to be made ungovernable, and the rural areas inaccessible to the enemy forces. The adversary's overwhelming military superiority meant that it was suicidal for the liberation struggle to develop to Mao's third level of guerrilla warfare- *the strategic mobile offensive*.

Rear administrative and training bases presented large and easy targets, detectable by the Rhodesian forces. These were attacked by air and ground troops with such ferocity and ruthlessness that the rear areas became less secure than the front. Many guerrillas preferred to die in the front fighting than being killed as sitting ducks at the rear. The *strategic bombing* of the rear may not have produced the intended results of scaring the nationalist leaders into submission. On the contrary, it may have contributed to the initial introduction of women guerilla fighters into the semi-liberated zones.<sup>28</sup>

The military wing of the liberation movement operated under the strong guidance of political leadership. There was a clear and unambiguous division of labor between the political and military wings. The liberation army was tasked

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struggle enormous assistance in medicines and moral support

<sup>27</sup> J K Cilliers, Counter-Insurgency in Rhodesia Croon Helm Ltd, Kent, 1985, pp 13-74

<sup>28</sup> For a detailed account of the role played by Zimbabwean women in the liberation struggle, See N'hongo Ph D Thesis-----b

with wearing down the enemy's capacity to continue fighting the war, while the political leadership maintained political and diplomatic pressure in the international arena. However, it was not a smooth relationship as the military at times felt that they were doing more towards the attainment of independence than the political wing. Internal friction was a common feature throughout the armed struggle. In such type of warfare, where there is no clear distinction between the front and the rear, the fog and friction of battle applies almost everywhere.

Ironically, anti communist propaganda by the Smith regime helped the mobilization of the black peasants to join the struggle in large numbers since they had nothing to lose from the introduction of communism in an independent Zimbabwe. In contrast, well-to-do blacks and most white and Asian minorities had a lot to lose in an independent communist Zimbabwe. This dichotomy sharply divided the population into two distinct camps. The black peasants--who constitute about ninety percent of the population, led by a small elite political leadership--thus strongly supported the liberation struggle. The remainder was either heavily in support of the Smith regime (in order to safeguard their possessions and privileges) or they remained undecided.

### **The Rhodesian Strategic Response**

When serious hostilities started in 1972, the Rhodesian forces were not prepared for the type of war they were now engaged in. The successful outcomes of earlier counter-insurgency operations may have convinced Smith and his commanders that a swift military solution could again be attained<sup>29</sup>. Their preoccupation with the notion that they were fighting communist-sponsored terrorism led to adoption of strategies that were counterproductive. The

Rhodesian strategies were heavily inclined towards attaining of a swift military solution, yet the counter-revolutionary warfare they were engaged in demanded a combination of both political and military solutions. This was not a war against terrorists. A.R Wilkinson is of the view that Ian Smith and his associates either completely failed to appreciate, or were reluctant to acknowledge, that much of the violence was the result of accumulated frustration and tension felt by the Africans in Rhodesia. He further points out that, the common view among the white community was that nationalist leaders (agitators) were the unwitting dupes, if not the conscious agents of communist powers intent on gaining a foothold in Central Africa. As a result, harsh repressive measures were introduced to curb the outbreak of violent protests.<sup>30</sup>

The center of gravity in this conflict was the rural population. During the period 1977 to 1979, the Rhodesian forces realized that the most important factor that sustained the "terrorists" momentum was support from the rural population. A serious, but faulty attempt to separate the guerrilla forces from the rural masses was undertaken. A system of protected villages (a modified version of concentration camps) was introduced in a desperate attempt to separate "the fish from the water". This had a negative impact on the strategy of the Rhodesian forces. Normal village routine was disrupted, further antagonizing the rural population and strengthening their resolve to get rid of the Smith regime

The Rhodesian government's approach and attitude to the resettlement of rural people in Protected Villages is reflected in the following extracts from an interview with Internal Affairs Minister, Jack Mussett in late 1974: " *.by taking tribesmen to protected villages we are saving their lives. I don't think we can be expected to do more than help them to help themselves.*" He added: " *.but we*

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<sup>29</sup> Henrick Ellert, " *The Rhodesian Security and Intelligence Community 1960-1980 A brief Overview* " in N Bhebe and T Ranger *Soldiers In Zimbabwe's Liberation War*, University of Zimbabwe Publications, Harare 1995, p 102

<sup>30</sup> Wilkinson Op , Cit p 4



*are not going to feed these people. They must grow their own crops. Those who have had to leave permanent buildings or property will be able to move back when the terrorist threat is over.*" Such policies only served to further alienate the security forces and the government from the rural people.

It would appear that the Rhodesian military had a more realistic perspective about the Rhodesian conflict situation. For example, whereas the civilian leadership, Internal Affairs Department and the Police-believed that unrest could be suppressed, some experts claim that the military realized that there was a need for a political solution but never got permission for a full scale Malaysian-style 'hearts and minds' campaign.<sup>31</sup> Protected Villages surrounded by guerrilla dominated countryside could never have produced the same effectiveness as Malaysian style transfers of population; Rhodesian 'psychological warfare' was half-hearted and ineffective.<sup>32</sup>

One major problem confronting Security Forces and other ministries involved in the execution of this strategy was lack of funds. Although various efforts were launched to develop protected villages as growth points, manpower, finance, political constraints, and lack of imagination led to their early demise. Thus, the planning document issued by the Department of Internal Affairs, concluded that the short-term objective was *the removal of the African people from terrorist influence for the sake of national security.*<sup>33</sup> The long term remained on the drawing board, to the detriment of the whole security forces' strategy and to the advantage of the freedom fighters.

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Bhebe and Ranger op Cit , p 15

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> The balance of available evidence rather suggests the execution of the strategy of Protected Villages suffered two major shortcomings. First there was an over-emphasis on the short term goal of physically concentrating the local population and the freedom of action this would give the Security Forces. In the second place there was a lack of sustained effort in the allocation of resources to the development of Protected Villages and the increase of the general standard of living in them. In those areas such as Madziva and Chiveshe Tribal Trust Lands where such a sustained effort had occurred the results were correspondingly better than elsewhere.

As more and more protected villages were constructed, less and less manpower was made available to monitor the movement of the people and provide adequate security for the villages. The guerrillas came and liberated these protected villages, further forestalling and reversing efforts by security forces. Indeed, the introduction of protected villages was a self-defeating strategy on the part of the Rhodesian war machinery.

As the liberation movement gained momentum and better publicity, the black population was moving in greater numbers into neighboring countries. To curb this, the Rhodesian forces adopted the strategy of *cordon sanitaire*. Unfortunately, the Rhodesians did not have adequate financial resources to put up a formidable *cordon sanitaire*-- like the one along the Israeli border with Lebanon and Syria, or the dividing lines between East and West Germany. Given Rhodesians' limited resources, the concept was a failure, as movement of insurgents across the borders remained unimpeded. The whole system could not meet the stringent requirements for an effective border control system, namely the provision of an effective and timely detection capability, ability to delay the enemy and effectiveness in neutralizing the insurgents.

Further frustrated by the escalation of war inside Rhodesia and by the increasing rate of casualties, the Rhodesian forces resorted to cross-broader strategic bombing and external operations. External operations were designed to disrupt command and control of the guerrilla forces, and disrupt logistic supplies and training programs in rear bases. At the strategic level, one can argue that they were meant to buy time for a political settlement, or they were aimed at overthrowing the existing host government to destroy that country's support for the liberation war. In the absence of a sound political strategy and with increasing sensitivity to white casualties the second option remained open throughout the latter part of the struggle.

With a total population of 270 000 whites out of 6 million blacks, white casualties had a disproportionately large effect. One expert analyst described the effects of white casualties on the white community as follows, "*an individual death, like a pebble dropped in water, might make a brief hole; yet rings of sorrow widen out there from. We could not afford casualties.*"<sup>24</sup>

One additional fundamental mistake that the Smith regime made was its failure to introduce reasonable political reforms to accommodate the views of moderate black leaders. This conclusion is vindicated by the impact of an internal settlement worked out between Smith and some moderate black leaders towards the end of the struggle. It almost crippled the entire revolutionary process. It did not produce the desired results because the reforms introduced were too little and came too late to invite international recognition of the internal settlement. Racial prejudices prevented the Smith regime from exploring realistic alternatives to the resolution of the Rhodesian conflict. As a result of this lack of strategic appreciation, the Rhodesian white settlers missed an opportunity to bring the conflict to an early end on their terms. The Rhodesian military won almost every battle they engaged in. However, their failure to understand the nature of war they were fighting, coupled with their inability to identify the center of gravity in this conflict, led to a settlement favorable to the freedom fighters

### **Lessons Learned**

Important lessons can be drawn from this analysis.

First, is the importance of knowing the nature of war one is engaged in. This applies both to the political leadership and the military commanders charged with the responsibility of waging the war to achieve the desired political ends. The

desired political End State for the white minority, that of "no black majority rule in a thousand years", was unattainable considering the overwhelming international and local forces arrayed against the illegal Smith regime. It can be argued that such an unrealistic objective was a result of ideological and racial thinking rather than rational assessments. The Rhodesian security forces and their political masters failed to understand the nature of war they were engaged in. They seemed not to have understood that the armed struggle was nothing but a "tactical appendage" of a far greater political contest and, that no matter how expertly they fought it with their undisputed military and technological superiority, they could not possibly make up for the absence of a political rationale. The guerrillas should be given credit for having adapted to the right strategies before it was too late.

Second, is the importance of international public opinion. The Smith regime humiliated Great Britain by declaring Unilateral Independence in a bid to forestall independence for the black majority. This resulted in almost the entire Commonwealth as well as independent African countries opposing the minority regime. When the issue of sanctions against Rhodesia was brought before the Security Council, none of the permanent members used its veto powers to block the imposition of mandatory economic sanctions. Thus, Rhodesia became the first country to experience mandatory UN economic sanctions during the Cold War period.

The third lesson is that in such conflicts, the population is the center of gravity. Winning the hearts and minds of the people is such a critical factor that it determines the outcome of the campaign. It was not the number of battles that the Rhodesian forces won that was decisive; neither was it the number of casualties they inflicted on the guerrillas. Rather, it was the trinity of the government in exile (political leadership), the military wing and the masses at

large that determined the outcome of the war of liberation in the former Rhodesia.

Fourth, is the realization that events outside the immediate war region could have enormous effects on the outcome of the conflict. The coup in Lisbon resulted in an unplanned Portuguese decolonization process that drastically changed the geo-strategic configuration in southern Africa<sup>35</sup> and attracted Soviet and U.S. interests and involvement. This, in turn, led to increased U.S. diplomatic involvement in seeking a peaceful solution to the problem of Rhodesia. It is, however, important to note that Henry Kissinger's diplomatic initiatives were half-hearted and biased in favor of the white minority.<sup>36</sup> He proposed a multi-year transitional period to majority rule, during which the whites would retain control of the mechanisms of power and state security. Although the nationalists rejected these proposals, the agreement that finally brought about Zimbabwe's independence had some elements of the Kissinger initiative. The nationalists managed to win political power and some elements of state security. The whites maintained a tight grip on the farms and the economy in general. This has led some analysts to conclude that the war of liberation in Zimbabwe ended in a draw. At the time of the Lancaster House Agreement, there was a military stalemate and neither side was guaranteed military victory in the short run. Politically, the nationalist won and it ended there. Economically, the status quo was maintained, further frustrating the ex-combatants and the landless peasants who lost their sons and daughters in the struggle for Zimbabwe. Had Ian Smith introduced black majority rule at an early stage, hundreds--if not thousands--of lives could have been saved on both sides.

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<sup>35</sup> The new Marxist government of Mozambique closed its border with Rhodesia and became a very strong rear base for guerrillas fighting against the Smith regime. Considering the massive build up of Cuban forces in Angola, Mozambique was considered to be ideologically most inclined to follow the Angolan experience and introduce Cuban troops. This was the point at which internationalization of the Rhodesian conflict was most feared.

<sup>36</sup> Kissinger points out that one of the main reasons he got involved in the southern African crises was the concern/reluctance to expose the white African minorities to precarious futures and to risk access to Southern Africa's strategic minerals. See H. Kissinger, *Op Cit* p. 903.

Finally, the above analysis further confirms Clausewitz's assertion that, *War is a remarkable Trinity consisting of primordial violence, hatred and enmity/passion (the realm of the people); chance and probability influenced by creativity (principally the realm of the military commander) and subordinated to policy, making it subject to reason (mainly referring to Government) part of balancing the Trinity is for the statesman and commander to determine the kind of war to be fought.*<sup>37</sup>

It took outsiders like Henry Kissinger to persuade Ian Smith that the type of war he was engaged in demanded a political solution, which, if properly crafted, would retain most of the privileges that the whites were enjoying. In hindsight, one wonders what the outcome could have been if Ronald Reagan had come to power before the settlement of the Rhodesian crisis<sup>38</sup>

## **Conclusion**

It took the brilliance of Lord Carrington and Henry Kissinger to map out a war termination package that satisfied the basic political demands of the African nationalists, while keeping the white minority population reasonably happy.

After nineteen years of independence, the black population is now asking what happened to the land distribution program that was to address their main economic concerns. The honeymoon is now over and the government is being put under enormous pressure to redistribute the land that their sons and daughters died fighting for.

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<sup>37</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, p 89

<sup>38</sup> President Ronald Reagan engaged the Marxist government in Angola through the use of South African forces. The ferocity with which this was done makes the writer wonder how his administration would have handled the Rhodesian problem now that the liberation movements were getting support from communist countries.

War termination is a complex undertaking. A delicate balance has to be struck between warring parties if prolonged hostilities are to be avoided. A situation where a winner takes all is only a sure recipe of future conflict. Failure to address the fundamental problems that an aggrieved people are determined to fight for, is equally a recipe for disaster. Zimbabwe is sitting on a time bomb as long as the land issue remains unresolved. The positive gains accrued over the past nineteen years as a result of a policy of reconciliation--adopted at independence-- could be eroded if the land issue remains unresolved.