Critical Dialogue

Black Soldiers in the Rhodesian Army: Colonialism, Professionalism and Race. By MT Howard. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. 308p. £85.00 cloth.
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Howard's *Black Soldiers in the Rhodesian Army* is an impressive contribution to the historiography of Zimbabwe as well as a contribution to the military history of late colonial Africa. Howard should be commended for taking on this project, which is primarily based on 54 interviews with Rhodesian African Rifles (RAR) veterans he conducted in Zimbabwe. Howard is cognizant of the difficulties of collective memory and nostalgia among his interviewees, which he addresses, but for the most part, their personal life histories are distilled into a singular argument about the role of loyalty to their fellow soldiers and units as the most important definition of their collective identity. In making this argument, Howard situates his history in a larger literature that has also taken on the difficult task of molding a narrative from the personal histories of soldiers who fought for former empires or nations, and who themselves were often defined at the time, and continue to be seen, as sellouts or traitors to the anticolonial, or anti-settler state, project. Howard tackles this issue head on, making a strong argument that it is necessary to present the story of black soldiers in the Rhodesian Defense Forces, and specifically the RAR, and not just those of the two nationalist armies, the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) and Zimbabwe's People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA).

This is a refreshing book in that it works against many of the older biases of nationalist and patriotic history in Zimbabwe. These older trends have tended to dismiss the experiences of black soldiers in the Rhodesian military, and to paint them all with the broad stroke of "sellouts" who were thought to be duped into accepting the rhetoric of the white regime of Ian Smith during the war of liberation. Howard rejects the notion that there was an ideological commitment, or allegiance, to the white Rhodesian state project, among some 4,000 black soldiers who served in the RAR by the end of war in 1979. His central premise, which is reinforced throughout the book, is that RAR soldiers held first and foremost an allegiance to their units and their fellow soldiers, and not to the country or white (and eventually black) leadership of the rogue Rhodesian state.

The first chapters explore the origins of the RAR and their valor fighting in Burma and Malaya during WWII. This was before the period of the Central African Federation (1953–1963), and before the period of the rogue state of Prime Minister Ian Smith and the Rhodesian Front during Unilateral Declaration of Independence period (1965–1979). Howard shows how this earlier generation of black troops in the RAR made a name for themselves during World War II and then passed on their traditions and a culture of professionalism to new recruits in the 1950s and 1960s. This tradition would help to explain how the RAR were able to carry forward their loyalty to their own culture, even as the white politicians in Rhodesia became increasingly incapable of uniting the black African majority with their minority rule ideologies. The irony, of course, is that the RAR continued British traditions of military discipline and training, while the predominantly white sections of the white Rhodesian Forces spiraled into greater and greater indiscipline as the liberation war intensified in the 1970s, represented both in the white conscripted forces (Territorial Forces) and the Selous Scouts. Howard develops this irony as a way of further demonstrating the unity of the RAR soldiers. The same was true in their comparison to the disorderly conducted demonstrated by the black Auxiliary forces organized during the internal settlement period (1978–1980), when a desperate state invested in arming thugs and political opportunists to ostensibly help support black leaders in the internal settlement. The RAR's internal discipline and culture of professionalism would stand in stark contrast to these Security Force Auxiliaries (251).

Howard relates how the former RAR he interviewed dealt with the racism and discrimination they faced daily in the military and the wider Rhodesian society. The reality of pay discrimination was one example, although they often recalled benefits of base camp living, such as school for their children, as a form of compensation. The ability to advance within the RAR was also a way of staying motivated in contrast to the color bar many black Rhodesians faced on the civilian side (111-12).

Howard deals with the sad reality of the violence RAR soldiers and their families faced outside of their barracks

and active duty. The killings of RAR soldiers when on leave, and sometimes their relatives, was a tactic used mostly by ZANLA to attempt to discourage blacks from enlisting. Howard shows how these killings were a reality, as more RAR were likely to have been killed while off duty in Rhodesia than killed in action (184-187). Still, based on his interviewees, this threat of death worked to keep the RAR engaged and enlisted. Howard's interviewees noted that one reason there was such a low desertion rate among the RAR soldiers was that, as one source put it, "we had nowhere to desert to anyway!. Nowhere to go" (187).

There is not a great deal of discussion of combat by the RAR interviewed. The sense conveyed by the interviews was that their professionalism and training, along with their superior knowledge and use of weaponry, meant that the guerrilla forces avoided engaging with the RAR in combat (160). The RAR soldiers Howard interviewed were extremely confident about their superiority over the ZANLA and ZIPRA forces they encountered. Howard notes that this created a sort of vibrato in their views of the guerrilla forces, that is tied to a sort of masculine rationalization of their role, as defenders of their families and those who were caught in the middle of the conflict (173). Interestingly, as Howard notes, the RAR was not deployed in cross-border raids into Mozambique or Zambia, which also helps to differentiate RAR discipline from the killings of civilians and unarmed Zimbabweans in training camps by other Rhodesian troops outside the country (178).

The last historical chapter covers the crucial events of the early years after Zimbabwe's Independence when the ex-ZANLA and ex-ZIPRA forces fought each other at different periods in 1981. Some of Howard's interviewees took part in suppressing these ex-ZANLA-ex-ZIPRA clashes. These were deadly conflicts, if short-lived. The events of Entumbane II, in Bulawayo on 11 February 1981, where ex-ZANLA and ex-ZIPRA soldiers fought each other, is the key example of former RAR using their discipline and weapons to end the conflict between ZANLA and ZIPRA forces literally overnight. One of Howard's interviewees explained that ZAPU leader Joshua Nkomo gave the RAR the order to shoot anyone with an AK-47. "BM noted that, unlike at Entumbane I, the old RAR's order gave them wide latitude to use force, which resulted in many deaths 'because they told us 'anybody who has got an AK[-47]—shoot them. But if he surrenders, don't shoot.'" BM relates that these orders came from Nkomo, "those who returned fire on us, we were told to kill them by Joshua Nkomo. He told us, he gave us the order" (233). That is an interesting claim for a former RAR soldier to make. It has significance for the interpretation of Nkomo's role in the early years of Independence.

Howard concludes that the role of the former RAR in putting down the interparty violence between ex-ZIPRA and ex-ZANLA demonstrates the main point of his book: "[t]hey espoused that their involvement in the fighting demonstrated in no uncertain terms the nature of what I have termed their professional loyalties, and the enduring power of what I refer to as their regimental loyalty in the face of interethnic conflict" (230). From this show of allegiance to the state, and not a party, the former RAR had assured their subsequent careers in the Zimbabwe National Army (230). In conclusion, I am certain Howard's book will have a large impact on the history of the Zimbabwean liberation war and will help inspire new scholarship in this area.

In the spirit of this forum, I should present some questions for Howard to address. These questions are not intended to be a criticism of his book, as anyone who has written a book before knows, the worst sort of criticism is the type that tells an author what sort of book they should have written. That is not my intent here, rather to ask some questions that can possibly lead Howard, or other scholars of the Liberation war, to address in future research. My first question would be to ask about the integration, or perhaps reintegration, of the RAR soldiers into their rural communities after the war ended. How where former RAR treated in their communities? Was there some sort of reconciliation that occurred? This would seem especially important for those who had loved ones killed during the war because of their role in RAR. Obviously, not all RAR would have been from rural areas, so the same question might apply to those from urban areas. Did they or their families experience any sort of discrimination or segregation after the war in their respective communities? Did some choose to leave Zimbabwe for the UK or elsewhere rather than try to reintegrate their families in Zimbabwe?

I would also like to know from Howard the degree to which the former RAR, given its earlier relative importance in the professional side of the Rhodesian Defense Forces, continued to have influence in the Zimbabwean National Army after 1981? The book talks of their continued role after 1980, until they were unceremoniously told they were no longer needed in 1989. A question might be what role they played during the process of building the ZNA and during the years of the *Gukurahundi* (1983–1987), that is how did the RAR veterans assisted in the integration of the former liberation forces into a natonal army. Their professionalism must have been once again held up in sharp contrast to the indiscipline and genocidal acts carried out by the 5 Brigade and other soldiers in the Zimbabwean National Army. Second, during the British Military Advisory and Training Team (BMATT) period in the 1980s, how did former RAR officers interact with the BMATT teams? How did they interact with the top

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brass of the Zimbabwean National Army as well, most of whom would have been ex-ZANLA, and some ex-ZIPRA? Did any former RAR serve in Mozambique in the 1980s, or in the DRC in the 2000s?

Response to Timothy L. Scarnecchia's Review of *Black Soldiers in the Rhodesian Army: Colonialism, Professionalism and Race.*

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— MT Howard

I would like to thank Timothy Scarnecchia for his generous review—it means a lot to read such kind remarks from someone whose work I admire. On to the questions: my interviewees relayed that, after the war, a spirit of "forgive and forget" prevailed. It would likely be a stretch to say that there was full-scale reconciliation, but people in the rural areas—where most of the Rhodesian African Rifles (RAR) hailed from—were tired of the long conflict.

Postwar stigma was not so much of an issue for RAR veterans. Firstly, even though it had been a particularly combat-effective unit, its use of violence was seen as military and "professional." This was in stark contrast to other units, like the Security Force Auxiliaries, which had used violence wantonly and for politicised purposes. Mugabe himself drew a clear, publicly announced distinction between "acceptable" ex-Rhodesian units, which were retained and then integrated into the Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA), and others such as the auxiliaries, which he summarily disbanded.

Secondly, within the nascent ZNA, my interviewees said, a form of militarised reconciliation between, on the one hand, so-called "formers"—(ex-Rhodesian Army personnel in the ZNA) – and, on the other, ex-members of the military wings of the liberation movements, forged through recollections of shared military experience and suffering, was particularly strong. Perhaps most importantly of all, the "formers" were seen by Mugabe, and ministers including current President Emmerson Mnangagwa, as effective, professional, and nonpartisan. They were keen to retain them as a counterbalance to the Soviet-equipped conventional army garrisoned across the Zambezi, loyal to Joshua Nkomo, which Mugabe feared could be used to seize power. There is no evidence that Nkomo sought this option. But it seems that Mugabe viewed the threat as real, and his faith in the "formers" was buttressed by their key role in suppressing antigovernment mutinies and infighting at Entumbane in 1980 and 1981.

While it was likely for these instrumental reasons, Mugabe's government treated its erstwhile enemies—the "formers"—rather well, especially compared to other post-decolonial war countries, e.g. Algeria and Guinea-Bissau, where thousands of ex-colonial troops were massacred and tortured. Very few "formers" left Zimbabwe—certainly very few ex-RAR. This was because they were welcome to continue their careers in the ZNA, which they were keen to do as professional soldiers. This also created opportunities for promotion, although there was a "glass ceiling" rank of Colonel.

My interviewees recalled that the "professional" ZNA units—of which they were part—were conspicuously kept separate from 5 Brigade and other units involved in the Gukurahundi massacres in Matabeleland and Midlands from 1983 to 1987. They had a good relationship with BMATT and thought it an effective and beneficial operation. Many "formers" did serve in Mozambique, partly because they served in the ZNA's best units, which were deployed there. All my interviewees had retired by the First Congo War of the late 1990s.

Owing to the word limit I cannot add further detail here but—at the risk of self-promotion—I subsequently wrote a journal article on this topic that discusses the very interesting history of the "formers" in the ZNA (M.T. Howard, "Allies of Expedience: The Retention of Black Rhodesian Soldiers in the Zimbabwe National Army", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 48(1), 2022).

Race and Diplomacy in Zimbabwe: The Cold War and Decolonization, 1960–1984.

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Decolonisation in Africa and the Cold War were inextricably linked. Over the last two decades, scholars have detailed the significant roles of key international actors in southern Africa during this period (e.g. Piero Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria, and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976–1991*, 2013). Zimbabwe's history has been long overdue for similar treatment, and Timothy Lewis Scarnecchia's *Race and Diplomacy in Zimbabwe: The Cold War and Decolonization* excels in this regard. Scarnecchia has undertaken yeoman's work in the archive, writing a refreshingly heterodox assessment of not only how geopolitics played a substantial role in the long and difficult road to independence, but why Western and other powers adopted their policies and positions.

The Rhodesian Front (RF) settler-colonial government, in power from 1962 to 1979, made its Unilateral Declaration of Independence from London in 1965. This, and the counter-insurgency (COIN) war against Zimbabwean nationalists, was couched by the RF in explicitly Cold War terms. Its propaganda cast the two principal liberation movements, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), as communist-inspired and supported (Donal Lowry, "The Impact of Anti-communism on White Rhodesian Political Culture, ca. 1920s–1980," *Cold War History*, 7[2]: 175–95, 2007).