



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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Rhodesian Bush War 1965–80

Executive Summary

In 1965, the colony of Rhodesia declared independence from the United Kingdom in an attempt to avoid decolonization and the inevitable elimination of white minority rule. Approximately 230,000 people, or about 5 percent of a total population of approximately 4.2 million at the time of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI), were white. The majority black population was divided between the Shona (approximately 90 percent of the indigenous population) and the Ndebele, the majority of whom lived in the southern part of the country around Bulawayo on the Botswanan border. The international community responded to the UDI with economic sanctions and a boycott of the country. Two armed groups began an insurgency against the white minority government of Ian Smith: the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), which was the military wing of the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), led by Robert Mugabe, and the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), the military wing of the overtly Marxist-Leninist political party, the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU-PF), led by Joshua Nkomo. Communist China supported ZANU-PF, and the Soviet Union provided arms, money, and training to ZAPU-PF. The Rhodesian government received some clandestine support from apartheid South Africa, but with the exception of oil, was largely self-sufficient.

The Rhodesian government carried out a remarkably successful military counterinsurgency campaign against the two insurgent groups, and it had some support from the black population. At no time during the conflict did the ratio of black soldiers fighting *for* the Rhodesian government to guerillas fighting *against* the government fall below 10:1. As a result, Rhodesian security forces were frequently able to infiltrate and destroy guerilla cells.¹ The Rhodesian government created a vertically integrated security architecture beginning at the bottom level with village protection groups, all the way up to the main force Rhodesian Army itself, which was considered the best military in Africa at the time. The Rhodesians also made optimal use of their very limited aviation assets through frequent airborne operations and invented the V-shaped hull for mine-resistant troop transport vehicles. Their intelligence network successfully gained human intelligence on insurgent safe havens, which informed more conventional military operations.² A special forces element of the Rhodesian Army, the Selous Scouts (1973–80), was especially adept at penetrating guerrilla units operating in Rhodesia and across the international border with Portuguese Mozambique.³ The Scouts comprised a mix of white and black commandos, and selection standards were rigorous. Some 68 percent of guerrillas killed or captured internally by 1980 were neutralized by the Selous Scouts.⁴

In spite of military success, however, the political situation was untenable, and South Africa was ultimately pressured by the international community into enforcing the international boycott and economic sanctions. This cut off Rhodesia's lifeline of fuel and oil supplies and forced the Smith government

to submit to peace talks in London in 1979, subsequently known as the Lancaster House Agreement. The political settlement implemented a transition to Zimbabwe and majority rule, led by ZANU-PF's Robert Mugabe, who remained in power until his death in 2019. All but about 40,000 whites left the country for South Africa and Australia by 2000.

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

No. Virtually only the 5 percent of the prewar population that was white identified itself as Rhodesian. The complete disenfranchisement of the majority black population meant that few blacks had any sense of affinity or identity at the national level. Nevertheless, many did serve in the Rhodesian military and police forces. Most, however, placed their identities at the supra-tribal level of the Shona and Ndebele ethno-linguistic divide.

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

No. White minority rule and the exclusion of blacks from government—and virtually all professional walks of life—created a stark class system based on race that thoroughly disenfranchised the majority population. Prior to the conflict, the Rhodesian government introduced legislation that gave it the power to suppress the National Democratic Party (NDP), which represented the black population, and steadfastly and purlblindly resisted even minor reforms that would have given the black population limited political voice and economic opportunity.⁵

3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

Yes. Although Rhodesian security forces were frequently unable to protect isolated white farmers and their families in remote rural settings, the development of local militias known as Village Defense Forces was rapid and efficient, and their vertical integration into government security forces was excellent. The racially integrated police force, known by its traditional name of British South Africa Police (BSAP), efficiently patrolled and protected urban areas, limiting ZANLA and ZIPRA to sometimes-effective guerilla attacks on urban infrastructure. Rhodesian counterinsurgency strategy remains a model of successful counterinsurgency warfare.

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

Yes. The insurgents had major safe havens outside Rhodesia in neighboring Zambia, Botswana, Mozambique, and to some extent South Africa. The extent of the borders and the relatively small size of the Rhodesian security forces meant that the borders could not be effectively sealed. However, the Selous Scouts and occasionally other Rhodesian Army elements, such as the Rhodesian Special Air Service (SAS), did pursue ZIPRA and ZANLA guerillas across international borders, notably into Portuguese Mozambique, occasionally inflicting serious casualties on guerillas seeking refuge there.⁶

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

Yes. The racially integrated Rhodesian Army was considered one of the best in Africa at the time of the conflict, and it performed with professionalism throughout the war, essentially winning the military conflict while the international isolation of the white minority Rhodesian government brought about its political defeat. The Rhodesian security forces did not experience a tactical defeat at any time during the war, but there were rare occasions when an operational objective was not achieved.

RHODESIAN BUSH WAR 1965–80	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	NO
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	NO
POPULATION SECURITY	YES
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	YES
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

Outcome

A settlement was negotiated between ZANU-PF, ZAPU-PF, and the white minority government. The settlement, the Lancaster House Agreement, brought ZANU-PF to power when Robert Mugabe won the election in 1980 along almost entirely ethnic lines. One of his first moves as the leader of the new Zimbabwe was to crush all Ndebele dissent and marginalize ZAPU-PF and its leader Joshua Nkomo, who died in 1999. The white population of 232,000 in mid-1979 dwindled to 80,000 by 1990, mostly farmers who could find no buyers for their land and livestock.⁷

Endnotes

1. Xander Causwell, “The Logic of Pseudo-Operations: Lessons from the Rhodesian Bush War,” *Georgetown Security Studies Review* (website), May 31, 2018, <https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2018/05/31/the-logic-of-pseudo-operations-lessons-from-the-rhodesian-bush-war/>.
2. Causwell, “Logic of Pseudo-Operations.”
3. Peter Baxter, *Bush War Rhodesia: 1966–1980* (Warwick, UK: Helion and Company, 2019), 37.
4. Charles D. Melson, “Top Secret War: Rhodesian Special Operations,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 16, no. 1 (2005): 64, <https://doi-org.du.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/0959231042000322567>.
5. UK Parliament, “Southern Rhodesia” (Hansard, July 26, 1960), <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1960/jul/26/southern-rhodesia>.
6. Baxter, *Bush War Rhodesia*, 30.
7. Peter Godwin and Ian Hancock, “*Rhodesians Never Die*”: *The Impact of War and Political Change on White Rhodesia c.1970–1980* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1993), 315.



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