

Reconsidering the Rhodesian war through white soldier-writers' stories

Luise White, *Fighting and Writing: The Rhodesian Army at War and Post-War*

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The title of Luise White's new book recalls the truism that every war is fought twice over: it is waged in the first instance on the battlefield and, thereafter, contested via representations such as books, films and social media. White's focus is on the memoirs and novels of Rhodesia's civil war written and (often self-) published by veterans. These soldier-authors participated in a war of counterinsurgency against guerrillas of the Zimbabwean liberation movements and, subsequently, mounted a rearguard struggle to monopolise the story of the Rhodesian war through their writings. White reflects that their stories of counterinsurgency were "more successful as a story than they were in practice" (p 223). This does not, ipso facto, invalidate their personal experience of war nor the entire corpus of Rhodesian memoirs as evidence. But evidence of what? White reckons that they "reveal soldiers' ideas about and analysis of wartime practices" (p 31). In other words, memoirs serve not as historical records per se but as experiential evidence of how the war was conducted by soldiers as actors in their own right. Only in this sense can the memoirs be treated as primary sources.

White's book charts new ground. Most of the extant texts on the Rhodesian war are military, regimental or unit histories; accounts that are concerned with examining the course and nature of the war. Despite declaring herself to be a military historian (p ix), White does not fit the "drums and trumpets" mould. Her approach is rather different. Although obviously well versed in the corpus of literature produced by traditional military historians, her work employs cultural and discourse analyses as means to understand what has shaped experiences, representations and memories of the Rhodesian war. In other words, *Fighting and Writing* bears the imprint of the cultural and linguistic turns in war studies. Its close reading of the memoirs enables White to mine these texts to good effect by interrogating the authors' subjectivities and predispositions. But she is judicious in her evaluation of the memoirs, even those that are often blatantly self-serving. Rather than dismissing them out of hand, White engages with memoirs on their own terms. At the same time, she is frequently self-reflective and asks what she as a historian might make of the memoirs. White is acutely aware of her own position as an "outsider" (American female academic) viz-a-viz the veterans and thus she pursues the study of her subjects and their writings with sensitivity.

The book's introduction provides a pithy historical contextualisation of Zimbabwe's liberation struggle and Rhodesia's bush war that is the distillation of decades of prior work on Rhodesian history. White Rhodesians generally referred to the conflict as the bush war, thereby suggesting that the fighting occurred for the most

part in terrain that was inhospitable and required taming. In certain respects, the Rhodesian military operated similarly to South Africa's *Boers*, farmers who fought two "wars of liberation" against British imperial forces, mobilising locally-based commando units to fight the enemy on familiar terrain. Like the *Boers* who were outnumbered by the imperial forces, Rhodesia "never had a stable and sizable population" (p 10) to wage a prolonged war against guerrilla armies supported, by and large, by the black majority. Thus, the Rhodesian forces comprised white conscripts, augmented by black auxiliaries. The army incorporated black Africans only as rank-and-file members and had a fairly rigid racial hierarchy. Its culture was more akin to the British colonial armies in terms of professional ethos, institutional practices and militarised masculinity, but its cohesion rested squarely on its (in)ability to sustain a spirited defence of white-minority rule. White notes that discipline was often lax and that units occasionally "went rogue" (pp 25–28). This was particularly notable when morale was at a low ebb. The Rhodesians also recruited or, at least, accepted a small number of mercenaries into its ranks in an attempt to offset shortages of manpower. This is because the Rhodesian war was viewed by many within and without the country as the "last stand of empire...in an English-speaking country" (p 12). Alternatively, Rhodesia was regarded as a bulwark against communism and/or African nationalism. But neither French nor American mercenaries from the Indochina Wars proved to be a good fit. And desertions by foreign soldiers, and increasing emigration by men who held Rhodesian citizenship, took its toll on the capacity of the Rhodesian army to wage war.

White is concerned with *how* and not why the war was fought. White argues, contrary to common sense understandings, that "almost no one believed that Rhodesia was trying to win the war" (p 17). The fighting was aimed at "buying time" so that the politicians might negotiate a favourable settlement from a position of strength (p 27). But White holds that "there was no fixed, shared vision of what peace might look like" and adds that "Rhodesian security forces were not fully in control [of the agenda] and sometimes not fully apprised of government policies and strategies" (p 17). White chooses to skirt the issue of why white Rhodesian men fought and, instead, asks why they continued to fight even when victory was no longer the goal. This is because she (quite correctly) argues that veterans would have provided different – and often inconsistent responses – depending on when they were asked such a question. As the situation in post-colonial Zimbabwe changes, so answers would be tailored to fit the here and now. White is well aware that Rhodesian veterans often offer post-hoc vindications for and not self-recriminations about their roles in the war. In the final analysis, she is unable to provide a definitive answer as to why they fought. This might be regarded by some readers as a circumvention or deflection of the historian's responsibility. In point of fact, many of White's arguments are qualified or couched in tentative terms that some readers might find unsatisfactory or even unsettling. If readers want sureties, they should look elsewhere, for history can and should challenge readers when the occasion demands. So, if they wish to be provoked, they should read White's book.

White not only asks awkward questions but she debunks many of the myths constructed by ex-Rhodesian soldiers. However, she is not dismissive or derisive and takes them seriously enough to subject them to close scrutiny. For example, chapter four is devoted to the interrogation of the commonplace narrative that many white Rhodesian boys were reared on farms and so were good marksmen and adept at other bushcraft skills which stood them in good stead when they served in the Rhodesian armed forces. She recounts veterans' stories which suggest, variously, that such skills were learned from nature or a familiarity with the veld, from Africans whom they mimicked, or, retrospectively, from books. These narratives fed into the veterans' self-perceptions that they were more than a match for the guerrillas in their use of camouflage, tracking and living off the land. But it is debatable whether such stories were representative of the typical white Rhodesian boy, as the majority of youths grew up in towns and were urbanised. It has been noted that very few boys were taking active roles in the military and hence measures were taken by the authorities to instil loyalty to the increasingly beleaguered Rhodesian state. Civil defence and school cadet programmes were regarded as a form of initiation into military service; the latter prepared generations of farm boys and city dwellers in the country's (boarding) schools for national service. Boys were taught to handle weapons and instructed in other drills that made transition to the army smoother. White acknowledges that bushcraft had to be learned (p 83), but she overlooks the fact that some of this training might have been formal, at least until cadet school programmes were discontinued in 1968. But we can agree that bushcraft was neither instinctive nor intuitive.

Although Rhodesia lost the war, its army gained the reputation as "a brave and almost invincible fighting force" (p 51). By contrast, the enemy was regarded as too poorly trained and ill equipped to win the war. Thus, the memoirs make frequent reference to the inability of the guerrillas to shoot straight or accurately. But, strangely enough, the guerrillas' standard weapon, the Russian-designed AK-47 was held in high regard by white soldiers on account of their dependability and versatility; so much so that they were much sought after and fetishized by these troops. Yet the provenance of AK-47s complicated the issue. In the hands of guerrillas, these weapons were deemed "communist" because they originated from the Soviet Union, Eastern bloc countries, or the Peoples' Republic of China (p 130). But in the hands of Rhodesians, the ties that linked these weapons to communist countries were regarded as inconsequential. In fact, the possession of "communist" weapons and the practice of "blacking up" made it possible for white soldiers to carry off their impersonation of guerrillas in so-called pseudo-gangs. While it was desirable for the Rhodesians to have a worthy enemy in order to bolster their self-esteem (p 157), their invincibility was a given. Consequently, many Rhodesian soldiers contributed to the so-called "won every battle narrative" (p 125). According to this narrative, Rhodesian soldiers won the war but lost the political struggle; that they were never defeated in military engagements but were still forced to concede black majority rule by perfidious politicians. Betrayal is inherent in this story line. Like veterans of other lost causes who have ended up on the "wrong side of history", they have attempted to rewrite history through the narratives that they have constructed in their memoirs.

The text is fluent and engaging. White's inimitable style is laced with tongue-in-cheek humour – for those able to discern it. There is a fair amount of repetition, but only a few minor errors, which has no bearing on the cut and thrust of the book's thesis.

White concludes that the body of veteran memoirs that she examines suggests “that there were limits to the Rhodesian ... white nationalist project, limits most clearly legible in the tension between fighting and writing” (p 226). This tension is played out in the public domain, especially in the sphere of public or cultural memory. It begs questions such as which version of the war is preserved in memoirs or why certain stories about the war have purchase in cultural memory. Should she wish to explore these issues further, White will necessarily have to position her work more squarely within the field of memory studies.

For all its strengths, *Fighting and Writing* is likely to have a limited appeal. It is not written with the lay reader in mind. It probably assumes too much prior knowledge for such an audience. The primary readership is likely to be scholars of war and veterans' studies. But the text is also likely to attract the interest of veterans of the Rhodesian war, especially from the ranks of the very soldiers who have produced the memoirs (and most of the fiction) about the war. As White notes, this is a well-storied war and these soldier-authors are apt to “fight openly with each other over who did what in the war” (p 43). Veterans engage in memoir wars. In other words, this body of literature is “self-referential and intertextual in the extreme” (p 47). So, it is equally likely that these memoirists will be keen to engage with White's analysis of their writings. But it is precisely because their narratives are anecdotal, frequently contradictory and misleading, that readers might welcome her intervention: not to verify 'facts', referee disputes or settle scores, but rather to provide a detached, well-informed scholarly perspective.

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