

# Rationalizing Gukurahundi: Cold War and South African Foreign Relations with Zimbabwe, 1981-1983

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*This article examines the role of diplomatic relations during the first stages of the 1983 Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe. Based on a preliminary reading of South African Department of Foreign Affairs files for 1983, the article suggests that Cold War relations between Zimbabwe and the United Kingdom helped to provide cover for the Zimbabwean National Army's Fifth Brigade's campaign of terror. Similarly, American support for Mugabe's claims to be a pro-Western leader committed to non-racialism helped provide international cover for the atrocities. At the same time, evidence shows high-ranking ZANU-PF officials negotiated with the South African Defense Forces in 1983 to cooperate in their efforts to keep ZAPU from supporting South African ANC operations in Zimbabwe. The 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade's campaign therefore served the purposes of South Africa, even as ZANU-PF officials rationalized the Gukurahundi violence in international and anti-apartheid circles as a campaign against South African destabilization. The article suggests that the diplomatic history of the Gukurahundi can provide a useful lens for understanding the tragedy in both regional and international Cold War contexts.*

In her popular book *Dinner with Mugabe* Heidi Holland includes a quote from Robert Mugabe where he accuses some factions in ZANU-PF of 'cutting deals with the British and Americans' after the 2005 elections.<sup>1</sup> Mugabe asks, 'Since when have the British, the Americans, been friends with ZANU-PF?'<sup>2</sup> Mugabe's often repeated claim that the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) are the enemies of ZANU-PF and hence of Zimbabwe does not stand up well to historical scrutiny. A party that will be fifty years old in 2013 has experienced a number of victories, and many of these were partly the result of American and British assistance, both directly and indirectly.

There are at least four periods in the transition from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe during which the US and the UK offered opportunities to Robert Mugabe and his allies to attain power and then consolidate it. The first was in 1963 with the formation of ZANU in Tanzania.<sup>3</sup> The second was during Henry Kissinger's 1976 shuttle diplomacy

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2 Heidi Holland, *Dinner With Mugabe: The Untold Story of a Freedom Fighter who became a Tyrant* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 195.

3 See Timothy Scarnecchia, *The Urban Roots of Democracy and Political Violence in Zimbabwe: Harare and Highfield, 1940-1964* (University of Rochester Press, 2008). The Congo crisis in 1960-64 also helped to shape Mugabe's own pro-Western Cold War strategies, see Timothy Scarnecchia, 'The Congo Crisis, the United Nations, and Zimbabwean Nationalism, 1960-1963', *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, 11, 1 (2011), 63-86.

and the subsequent removal of radical forces from ZIPA following the talks.<sup>4</sup> The third period was during the elections after the Lancaster House agreement when the British, under American pressure, rushed an election and peace settlement in order to pre-empt further Soviet and Cuban involvement in Zimbabwe, which resulted in a victory for Robert Mugabe.<sup>5</sup> Mugabe received extensive support from the UK and US governments, while simultaneously portraying his government as a leading Frontline state in the anti-apartheid struggle. However, the anti-apartheid efforts of ZANU-PF were constrained by the realities of regional power. Faced with a much more powerful South African military and economy, Mugabe found it more convenient to co-operate with the South African Defence Forces against Nkomo's ZAPU given the historic ties between ZAPU and the African National Congress (ANC). Cold War realities meant that Mugabe could benefit from his rivals' longstanding support from the Soviets and the links between Soviet support for ZAPU and the ANC. Mugabe and others in Zimbabwe's new government therefore worked with South Africa to keep ZAPU from providing bases for the ANC's *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (The Spear of the Nation) (MK) in Zimbabwe.

This article will take a preliminary look at a fourth period, which took place during 1981-1983, and examine how the Cold War offered Mugabe and ZANU-PF the international 'cover' to carry out atrocities against Zimbabwean civilians in a campaign known as the *Gukurahundi*. This military campaign, which began in January 1983 and then returned before, during, and after the 1985 elections, cost the lives of thousands of Zimbabweans.<sup>6</sup> Those involved as perpetrators of the violence were granted a blanket amnesty after the creation of a new unity government in 1987, and thus far calls for a national Truth and Reconciliation Commission to address this violence have not been answered. The archival documents for early 1980s' diplomatic history with Zimbabwe are just becoming available in the United States and the United Kingdom, and more documents will be released over the next few years. Some very helpful evidence is now available in the South African Department of Foreign Affairs files for 1983 in Pretoria. Based on the latter, the following discussion

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4 David Moore, 'The ZIPA Moment in Zimbabwean History, 1975-1977: Mugabe's Rise and Democracy's Demise' in Carolyn Basset and Marlea Clarke, eds., *Legacies of Liberation: Post-colonial Struggles for a Democratic Southern Africa* (Toronto and Cape Town: Fernwood and HSRC, 2012; forthcoming); David Moore, 'Now Onus is on SA to Deliver', *Cape Times*, 3 February 2009, 10; Wilf Mhanda, *Dzino: Memories of a Freedom Fighter* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2011); Stephen John Stedman, *Peacemaking in Civil War: International Mediation in Zimbabwe, 1974-1980* (Boulder: Lynn Reiner, 1991), 85-125; Alex Thomson, *U.S. Foreign Policy Towards Apartheid South Africa, 1948-1994: Conflicts of Interests* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

5 Stedman, *Peacemaking in Civil War*; Sue Onslow, 'South Africa and Zimbabwean Independence' in Sue Onslow, ed., *Cold War in Southern Africa: White Power, Black Liberation* (London: Routledge, 2009), 110-129; William Bishop, 'Diplomacy in Black and White: America and the Search for Zimbabwean Independence, 1965-1980' (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Vanderbilt University, 2012).

6 The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe's *Breaking the Silence: Building the Peace* (1997) noted in the introduction that the figure of '20,000 dead' originated with Joshua Nkomo's autobiography with 'other sources putting the figure as low as 700', and suggested that '[t]here is a need to resolve these disparities by methodological investigation'. *Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe: A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands, 1980-1988* (London: Hurst and Company, 2007), 8. Lloyd Sachikonye notes: 'Between 10,000 and 20,000 people were estimated to have been killed in this violence that was largely unleashed by the Fifth Brigade in early 1983.' Sachikonye, *When a State turns on its Citizens: 60 Years of Institutionalised Violence in Zimbabwe* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2011), 15. Sheri Eppel, who has done the most research on the victims of the *Gukurahundi*, wrote in 2005 that 'it was clearly an estimated 3,500 members of the 5th Brigade who benefited most [from the April 1988 amnesty]: they were pardoned for the murders of 10,000 civilians, the rape and torture of tens of thousands more, and property destruction often resulting in total loss for victims across most of Matabeleland and parts of the Midlands.' Eppel, 'Gukurahundi': The Need for Truth and Reparation' in Brian Raftopoulos and Tyrone Savage, eds., *Zimbabwe: Injustice and Political Reconciliation* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2005), 46. For ZANU-PF strategies to guarantee victory in the 1985 elections, see Norma Kriger, 'ZANU(PF) Strategies in General Elections, 1980-2000: Discourse and Coercion', *African Affairs*, 104, 1-34. For a detailed summary of ZANU-PF efforts to remove ZAPU elements in government, see Ronald Weitzer, *Transforming Settler States: Communal Conflict and Internal Security in Northern Ireland and Zimbabwe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 171-83.

outlines some of the difficult issues historians of foreign relations will confront as more diplomatic sources become available. As there already exists a large amount of writing in the 'state formation' literature on Zimbabwe's first few years, and the ways in which ZANU-PF consolidated power at the expense of the Ndebele minority, this article will examine this period through the lens of diplomacy.<sup>7</sup>

The Cold War gave extraordinary powers to small states and allowed African nationalist leaders to manipulate their often-precarious ties to a mass base through the rhetoric of anti-imperialism, socialism and the non-aligned movement. It appears that all sides, while recognizing the relative imbalances of power, nevertheless understood there were times when intransigency on international issues gave Mugabe and the ZANU-PF elites greater bargaining power than would have been possible without the threat of Cold War co-operation with the Soviets and Cubans. The violence created by Cold War interventions into decolonization from 1960 to the early 1990s was tragic and costly to southern Africa's populations, although one cannot forget that for certain elites the Cold War offered room to manoeuvre against their rivals and to benefit directly from Cold War foreign aid.

Given this hot cold war in southern Africa, as Vladimir Shubin has called it, Mugabe, like other Frontline State leaders, was able to have both American and Soviet support for the new nation. The Soviets, who had previously supported Mugabe's rival Joshua Nkomo and ZAPU, realized it would be better to try and influence policies in Harare directly through Mugabe and those in ZANU-PF who were ostensibly pro-Soviet.<sup>8</sup> Because of Western pressure on Mugabe to show his anti-communist credentials in exchange for direct financial aid, the Soviet embassy was the last embassy to be opened in Harare after Independence, and despite inroads in terms of technical and some military support, the Soviets were not made to feel welcome in the early 1980s. Part of the agreement to establish relations with the Soviets included the insistence that the USSR break ties with ZAPU and deal only with ZANU-PF. According to Shubin, the Soviets had already stopped their material support to ZAPU 'immediately after the political settlement was reached', but ZANU-PF wanted to rule out any future Soviet aid to ZAPU.<sup>9</sup> The Americans viewed Mugabe and Zimbabwe as a non-Soviet southern African state that with sufficient funding and support could help maintain a balance against Soviet and Cuban influence in Angola, Mozambique and to a certain extent in Zambia.

However, Cold War interests were not the only factor influencing American diplomatic views of Mugabe. American opinion favoured seeing Mugabe's new state as a victim of past racial oppression. Therefore Mugabe's strategy to reconcile with white farmers by allowing them to remain on their land and with white owners of businesses was very popular with American diplomats and a non-racial reconciliation made Mugabe popular in Washington. As Nancy Mitchell argues, the Carter Administration had feared direct Cuban and Soviet involvement in Zimbabwe that would likely lead to a war between South Africa and the Frontline states. In order to avoid

7 O. Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 95; Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 429; Daniel Compagnon, *A Predictable Tragedy: Robert Mugabe and the Collapse of Zimbabwe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 23-27; Jeffrey Herbst, *State Politics in Zimbabwe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 169; Sachikonye, *When a State Turns on its Citizens*, 14-17; Brian Raftopoulos and Alois Mlambo, eds., *Becoming Zimbabwe: A History from the Pre-colonial Period to 2008* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2009), 28-29.

8 Vladimir Shubin, *The Hot 'Cold War': The USSR in Southern Africa* (London: Pluto Press, 2008).

9 Shubin, *The Hot 'Cold War'*, 187.

such a conflict, the Americans pressured the British to work with Mugabe rather than Nkomo and Bishop Muzorewa as the leader of the Patriotic Front preferred by America.<sup>10</sup> The British and the South Africans were less convinced than the Americans of Mugabe's non-racialism, given their substantial personal and financial ties to white-controlled interests in Rhodesia, but Mugabe's peaceful transition to power in 1980 became a major foreign policy success for Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher during her first term in office. As Chris Saunders and Sue Onslow suggest, the Americans saw the peaceful transition to Zimbabwe brokered by the British as "the greatest reverse the Russians have suffered in Africa for years." Saunders and Onslow point out that '[m]uch of this was, in reality, the West being purblind in the context of the Cold War, for Mugabe continued to use violence to achieve political goals in independent Zimbabwe."<sup>11</sup>

The West responded to the 'success' of Zimbabwean Independence with development funds, both as a Cold War strategy and because it served to reward Mugabe for reconciliation and racial tolerance in 1980. There was a hope that Zimbabwe would stand as a model for transition in Namibia and South Africa in order to avoid further Cold War conflicts. The amount of Cold War funding for Zimbabwe was quite sizeable. In 1981, the Zimcord meeting produced an impressive commitment from numerous donors to assist Zimbabwe. 'At current exchange rates the total aid attracted by Zimbabwe now amounts to US\$1.95 billion. This is more than the US\$1.5 billion suggested – over 5 years – by Dr. Henry Kissinger as part of the 1976 settlement package. Furthermore, the Zimcord aid refers only to a three-year period.'<sup>12</sup>

Just prior to the Zimcord conference, which was to include representatives from '40 countries, 16 United Nations organizations, and 10 international agencies', Mugabe linked development funding to the South African threat. 'We call on the international community to show its fullest practical support for our nonracial democratic system and put into practical effect its abhorrence and repugnance of the apartheid system in South Africa.' Failure to give Zimbabwe support for its reconstruction and development plans would bolster the 'evil designs of the apartheid regime in South Africa to hold our economy to ransom and destabilize our political system.'<sup>13</sup>

This strategy succeeded for the first few years of Zimbabwe's existence, but the Cold War-funded security state did not in itself sufficiently enrich the ZANU-PF elites, as Norma Kriger demonstrates, given the continued domination of white businesses and farms, and white control over key government bureaucracies. Mugabe and his colleagues in ZANU-PF decided to take action to gain access to wealth for Party elites, but they were constrained by the international perception of non-racial reconciliation, which made it difficult to attack white business and farming interests. Faced with entrenched opposition, Mugabe and ZANU-PF looked to guerrilla war veterans as their main patronage group. At first this included both ZANLA and ZIPRA, but by

10 Mitchell writes of the Carter administration: 'the resonance of race in America enabled the war in Rhodesia to be seen, for a while, not as a forum of East-West conflict but as a struggle for justice, as a nationalist struggle. Race allowed people who would normally be labeled "terrorists" to be seen as freedom fighters.' Nancy Mitchell, 'Terrorists or Freedom Fighters?: Jimmy Carter and Rhodesia' in Onslow, ed., *Cold War in Southern Africa*, 193; see also Andrew DeRoche, *Black, White, and Chrome: The United States and Zimbabwe, 1953 to 1998* (Trenton, NJ, Africa World Press, 2001); and DeRoche, Andrew Young: *Civil Rights Ambassador* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2003).

11 Chris Saunders and Sue Onslow, 'The Cold War and southern Africa, 1976-1990' in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 234.

12 'The Zimcord Conference', 6 April 1981, SANA DFA 1/156/7, vol. 6 Zimbabwe: Foreign Policy. 10/2/81 to 24/6/81.

13 'Mugabe tells of danger if aid is denied', *Rand Daily Mail*, 24 March 1981.

1981 'the ruling party, ZANU-PF, and its ZANLA guerrillas could not conceal their preference for building power on an exclusively ZANLA guerrilla base and for using only ZANLA's guerrilla struggle for legitimacy.<sup>14</sup> The resulting attacks on ZAPU's political organization, former ZIPRA ex-combatants, economic assets, and civilian base became the fundamental basis for Operation *Gukurahundi* in 1983.<sup>15</sup>

### South Africa's Involvement in the *Gukurahundi*

Historian Sue Onslow has investigated South Africa's role in trying to make sure Robert Mugabe and ZANU-PF did not come to power in 1980. Onslow sums up South Africa's strategy after Mugabe's electoral victory and its impact on the conflict between ZANU and ZAPU. 'Mugabe's victory shocked Pretoria. This drove South Africa back onto violence and subversion in neighbouring countries, rather than trying to manipulate the political process.' Onslow argues that the involvement of South Africa in supplying a small amount of weapons to ZIPRA dissidents 'rebounded on ZAPU/ZIPRA forces' in the *Gukurahundi* 'as the Mugabe government ... was able to stigmatise the disaffected ZIPRA combatants as stooges of the apartheid state, manipulated by a malevolent and oppressive foreign power.'<sup>16</sup> South Africa did more to destabilize Zimbabwe in these years, but the support for 'super-ZAPU' dissidents proved to be the most important factor in helping the ZANU-PF government rationalize the *Gukurahundi*.

South Africa's President P.W. Botha launched his 'total strategy' to defend South Africa from Communist aggression in 1981. As Stephan Chan describes it,

Zimbabwe was not the main military target. Angola and Mozambique were. The idea was to make Zimbabwe and Zambia feel as if they were caught, west and east, in a pincer – so anxious that the conflict on the borders should not overspill that they dared not look south.<sup>17</sup>

This is an important point to remember, how in a Cold War context, Zimbabwe's relative insignificance in South Africa's 'total strategy' permitted ZANU-PF to take advantage of the South African threat internationally while avoiding a direct conflict through co-operation at the highest levels. The Zimbabwean economy was still almost 75% dependent on South African trade in these first few years, so there was little alternative but to co-operate with Pretoria. As Stephen Ellis and Tsepo Sechaba have shown, the South African military attacked ANC targets in Zimbabwe with little

<sup>14</sup> Kriger continues, 'Between 1980 and 1987, the new regime sanctioned and instigated violence and intimidation in collaboration with ZANLA ex-combatants as they both sought power in the army, the civil service, the private sector, and cooperatives.' She concludes that 'the party [ZANU-PF] used ZANLA ex-combatants in the state security forces to violently punish ZIPRA ex-combatants in and out of the army. The vendetta against ZIPRA continued until the unity agreement in 1987, when the party felt it had crushed ZAPU/ZIPRA.' Norma Kriger, *Guerrilla Veterans in Post-war Zimbabwe: Symbolic and Violent Politics, 1980-1987* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4, 186. ZANU's guerrilla army was the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), and ZAPU's guerrilla army was the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA). See also Horace Campbell, *Reclaiming Zimbabwe: The Exhaustion of the Patriarchal Model of Liberation* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003), 40-56.

<sup>15</sup> Eliakim Sibanda emphasizes that the timing of the attacks on ZAPU must also be understood as part of a larger competition over economic resources between the two political parties and their guerrilla forces. ZAPU would suffer greatly as Mugabe and his colleagues began to claim their properties, some of which included very large cooperative farms. Eliakim Sibanda, *The Zimbabwe African People's Union, 1961-87: A Political History of Insurgency in Southern Rhodesia* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005), 249-254.

<sup>16</sup> Sue Onslow, 'South Africa and Zimbabwean Independence' in Onslow, ed., *Cold War in Southern Africa*, 126.

<sup>17</sup> Stephan Chan, *Southern Africa: Old Treacheries and New Deceits* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 35-36.

opposition. Such attacks included the assassination of the ANC's Joe Gqabi in July 1981. 'South African agents made a series of bomb attacks against the Zimbabwean government.' One of these attacks, in December 1981, was an unsuccessful attempt to kill the ZANU-PF Central Committee in their Harare headquarters. The bomb was detonated in a room above but the Central Committee had postponed the meeting.<sup>18</sup> Given the ability of South Africa to act with impunity in Harare, there was little chance that ZANU-PF would be able to confront South Africa militarily. The Zimbabwean government responded by using the existence of these attacks to consolidate power internally by arresting those former white officers allegedly serving as South African agents and by arresting ZAPU leaders and attacking ZAPU supporters.

By 1982 South Africa's strategy to attack Mugabe had begun to create its desired effects. As Jocelyn Alexander, JoAnn McGregor, and Terence Ranger argue in their history of Matabeleland, of all the South African acts of sabotage between 1981 and 1982, the most important for understanding the *Gukurahundi* was 'Operation Drama' of late 1982, an effort which involved recruiting and arming a Zimbabwean insurgent group, dubbed 'Super Zapu'. 'Various South African agents, many of them recruited from the Rhodesian intelligence service, also played a key role in fomenting distrust.'<sup>19</sup> Alexander *et al* describe the conflict between these South African trained and armed 'Super Zapu' and the 'pure Zapu' dissidents between 1982 and 1983 when the South Africans supported 'never more than 100 (and probably substantially fewer) inside the country'. Although outnumbered by the 'pure Zapu' who wanted nothing to do with South Africa, these 'super Zapu' dissidents had better weapons and more ammunition, which was in short supply by 1983. The former Zipra fighters who became dissidents never totaled more than 400.<sup>20</sup> Joseph Hanlon suggested that the Super Zapu developed as a response to the deployment of the Fifth Brigade, as South Africa took advantage of the growing anger of former ZIPRA fighters and civilians living in refugee camps in Botswana.<sup>21</sup> While Alexander *et al* stress the small numbers of South African-trained and supplied Super ZAPU, and the response to them by former ZIPRA dissidents, the reality was that public knowledge of South African support supplied Mugabe, in the Cold War and regional context, the necessary pretext to rationalize the attack on ZAPU and ZIPRA dissidents as primarily a response to an *external intervention*.<sup>22</sup>

In January 1983 the Fifth Brigade of the Zimbabwe National Army, consisting of between 2,500 and 3,500 soldiers, was deployed by Mugabe in Matabeleland and

18 Stephen Ellis and Tsepo Sechaba, *Comrades against Apartheid: The ANC and the South African Communist Party in Exile* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 108.

19 In addition to the attempts at blowing up the ZANU-PF leadership in 1981, there had been 'South African sabotage at the Inkomo Barracks in August 1981. In July 1982, South Africans orchestrated an attack on the Thornhill Air Force base, which all but destroyed the Zimbabwean Airforce (ZAF). There had also been a clash between South African Defence Forces (SADF) operatives inside Zimbabwe, leading to the death of three white soldiers in August 1982 ...' Jocelyn Alexander, JoAnn McGregor & Terence Ranger, *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the 'Dark Forests' of Matabeleland*, (Oxford: James Currey, 2000), 189; see also Geoffrey Nyarota, *Against the Grain: Memoirs of a Zimbabwean Newsman* (Cape Town: Struik, 2006), 86-89; Eliakim Sibanda, *The Zimbabwe African People's Union, 1961-87*, 249-354.

20 Alexander, *et al*, *Violence and Memory*, 196-8.

21 Joseph Hanlon, *Beggar Your Neighbours* (London: Catholic Institute for International Relations and James Currey, 1986), 180. The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe's *Breaking the Silence: Building the Peace* (1997) based its analysis of South African intervention and the role of Super-ZAPU primarily on Hanlon's book. See the republished version: Hanlon, *Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe: A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands, 1980-1988* (London: Hurst and Company, 2007), 90-91.

22 For details of this dynamic, see Donald P. Chimankire, *South Africa's Destabilisation Policy: The Zimbabwe Experience* (Lesotho: Institute of Southern African Studies, 1992) and, E.P. Makambe, *Marginalising the Human Rights Campaign: The Dissident Factor and the Politics of Violence* (Lesotho: Institute of Southern African Studies, 1992).

the Midlands provinces to ‘crush’ the dissidents. Made up almost entirely of Chi-Shona speaking former ZANLA fighters, the Fifth Brigade’s operation was called ‘*Gukurahundi*’, a Chi-Shona term that translates as ‘the early rain which washes away the chaff before the spring rains’. The Fifth Brigade would proceed to terrorize the populations of the Midlands and Matabeleland provinces, leaving thousands of dead civilians and many others traumatized by their terror tactics.

Mugabe’s ability to contain information about *Gukurahundi* was one reason for the lack of international outcry. The Zimbabwean state invoked curfews and denied press access to those areas witnessing the worst atrocities. The state also used Rhodesia-era laws to impose a State of Emergency, detain and arrest ZAPU leaders, and deport international journalists for their reporting of human rights abuses. But another reason was the general sympathy most informed Westerners had for Mugabe and ZANU-PF given its role as a Frontline State. The ZANU-PF official line – that given the South African support for the dissidents, the response of the Fifth Brigade was warranted – fits well with the anti-apartheid movement’s solidarity with the Frontline States.<sup>23</sup>

But stories of the Fifth Brigade’s atrocities did manage to get out to the wider world. One of the most perceptive commentaries came from the *Guardian*’s Nick Davies:

The slaughter of innocent villages in Matabeleland is only the most bloody symptom of a Government clampdown which has seen thousands detained without trial, opponents tortured, the press muzzled, the courts defied and trade unions brought to heel.

The rebellion of armed ‘dissidents’ in Matabeleland is a direct challenge to the Government’s whole posture – its Shona domination, its failure to redistribute wealth, particularly the land, and its compliance with Western free enterprise.

The Government’s response has been equally direct – a deliberate and determined campaign to wipe out the dissidents, to liquidate Joshua Nkomo’s Zapu party which is accused of directing them, and to cause such terror among ordinary civilians that their popular support will wither.<sup>24</sup>

Davies’ reporting presented the realpolitik behind the rhetoric. It shows that there were brave reporters willing and quite capable of unmasking the masquerade at work in the rhetoric and propaganda produced in Harare and echoed in London and Washington.

23 ‘Zimbabwe’s North Korean-trained 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade yesterday showed off its Russian tanks and multiple rapid-firing rocket launchers to the Prime Minister, Mr. Robert Mugabe - who said the army was being sharpened to defend the country against South African aggression. Mr. Mugabe said the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade’s new equipment was needed because South Africa was intensifying its training programme with a view to destabilising Zimbabwe. He said he thought the threat from South Africa was greater than the problems caused by dissidents in Zimbabwe.’ (‘Zimbabwe shows new Red Arms’, *The Star*, 22 March 1983).

24 Davies continues: ‘Some of his liberal supporters cling to the hope that he has somehow managed not to be involved. It is a thin hope ... His own words seem to many to implicate him. In a speech on dissidents to the Zimbabwe Assembly last July, he warned: “Some of the measures we shall take are measures which will be extra-legal ... An eye for an eye and an ear for an ear may not be adequate in our circumstances. We might very well demand two ears for one ear and two eyes for one eye.”’ Nick Davies, ‘The Massacre that Misfired’, *Guardian*, 23 March 1983, 15. On 7 March 1983, Davies followed ZANU-PF minister Enos Nkala on his tour of Matabeleland and quotes Nkala on the reasons for the *Gukurahundi*. For Nkala and the other ministers there is now no distinction between dissidents and ZAPU. “If you liquidate ZAPU then you have no problems with dissidents,” he said. “The battle will be fought here in Matabeleland. Militarily or politically it will be fought here.”’ Nick Davies, ‘Mugabe Stops the Talk and Starts to Kill’, *Guardian*, 7 March 1983, 15.

The views expressed in South African Department of Foreign Affairs files for 1983 pointed out the failure of Western Cold War powers to criticize Mugabe for the *Gukurahundi*, but there is also a sense that the *Gukurahundi* was viewed as a 'success' from the South African point of view. It offered a number of 'benefits', first and foremost making it difficult for the ANC's *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (The Spear of the Nation) (MK) to use Matabeleland as a base for training and attacks across the border into South Africa. It also worked to discredit Mugabe's international reputation as a Prime Minister representing a party committed to national reconciliation. It also, paradoxically, pushed Zimbabwe to co-operate with South Africa on military and intelligence issues, however tentatively and mistrustingly. Bi-annual meetings between the intelligence staff of Zimbabwe's Central Intelligence Organization (CIO) and their counterparts in the South African Defence Force (SADF) were held in 1982 and 1983. The SADF notes of the 7 and 8 February 1983 meeting in Harare are in the DFA files. The minutes of this meeting, which took place one month after the Fifth Brigade had been deployed in Matabeleland North, indicate a much less strident tone concerning South Africa's role in supporting dissidents than that heard in the Zimbabwean media.

The joint intelligence leaders talked about the 'role of communist powers in Southern Africa', 'internal terrorism', and the 'security situation in Angola, Mozambique, Botswana, and Zimbabwe'. The discussion reportedly noted that 'Botswana is falling heavily under the influence of the USSR and accommodating ZIPRA, ANC and SWAPO is cause for common concern' and that 'Zimbabwe does not consider political support of the ANC in the same category as military support. For this reason, they provide office facilities to the ANC in Harare but do not allow them to infiltrate over the RSA/Zimbabwe border.' At the same time, the Zimbabwe CIO stated that the so-called dissident problem in Matabeleland was serious and that the rift between ZANU-PF and ZAPU-PF was deep. They conceded that the Lancaster House formula was partly to blame for this situation. The Zimbabweans repeated the caveat that 'although Mr. Mugabe was an outspoken Marxist, it did not necessarily mean that he was in the USSR camp'. The South Africans proposed the formation of a 'Joint Crisis Committee' to handle 'any matter which caused tension to the relations between the two countries and needed prompt rectification to diffuse the situation'. The Zimbabwean's reply was that 'such a committee is not deemed necessary as no conflict existed between the two countries'. The South Africans suggested the Zimbabweans should accept Prime Minister P.W. Botha's 'offer to sign a non-aggression pact and the deployment of monitoring teams on either side of the Zimbabwe border'. This proposal, from the lack of comment, must have been a non-starter for the Zimbabweans.

Zimbabwe's Minister of State for Security, Emmerson Mnangagwa, met personally with the SADF team. According to the SADF report, Minister Mnangagwa took personal credit for obtaining 'permission from the Prime Minister [Mugabe] for the SADF visit to Harare and for future intelligence meetings of a similar nature. He claimed that he [Mnangagwa] initiated the RSA/Angola and RSA/Mozambique dialogue.' Mnangagwa also stated that 'there were no matters in the Zimbabwe/RSA relations that were so serious that it required meetings at ministerial level'.<sup>25</sup>

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25 'Memo to Directeur General Van Wentzel', 14/3/1983 South African National Archives (SANA), Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) 1/156/1, vol. 126 Zimbabwe Political Situation and Development 1/3/83 to 13/3/83.

Mnangagwa's lack of interest in addressing Zimbabwe's issues with South Africa directly with the SADF demonstrates the inequality of the relationship between South Africa's military and Zimbabwe's, as well as the fear that any formal co-operation would be detrimental to Zimbabwe's perception internationally as fighting apartheid in South Africa. In September 1983 American Diplomat Robert Cabelly told the South Africans that 'Zimbabwe felt that Moçambique and Angola had in fact let them down by having Ministerial meetings with South Africa.' This is an interesting example of how the Americans and South Africans were hearing different things from the Zimbabweans, especially given Mnangagwa's taking credit for initiating the dialogue between South Africa and the two countries most affected by South African military intervention.<sup>26</sup> Cold War and regional diplomacy were obviously not on the same channel.

Later, in October 1983, Mnangagwa held a press conference that was described in the Zimbabwean *Herald* newspaper and recorded with commentary in the South African DFA file. Mnangagwa presented two young Zimbabweans, one sixteen and the other eighteen years old. They were allegedly trained by South Africa to return to Zimbabwe and fight as dissidents. These two young men were described as having confessed to murdering 'a white farmer, his children and the foreman in the Gwanda area', of ambushes on government vehicles, of 'cutting off the hands of two ZNA soldiers and shooting them west of Beitbridge', and the 'destruction of DDF tractors, Caterpillars etc near Kezi.' Mnangagwa reported that these two men had admitted to being in South Africa for four months, where they were allegedly trained to go to Zimbabwe 'to unseat Mugabe's government as he was not fit to rule.' Their trainers allegedly told them that Dr. Nkomo was 'the right man to govern Zimbabwe' and instructed them to return to 'destroy everything and murder farmers as they were the ones who grow food that is eaten by Mugabe's dogs.' The South African DFA commentary pointed out 'the fact that Zimbabwe authorities did not raise the matter through the normal channels and instead called an international press conference indicates that this was yet another propaganda exercise to reinforce the destabilisation theme. The extent of international media coverage will be an indication of the effectiveness of this attempt to prove SA complicity in dissident activities based on dubious circumstantial evidence.' The South African Department of Foreign Affairs representatives in Harare were good at maintaining their official ignorance of 'Operation Drama.' One of the key double agents working for the South Africans while also serving in Zimbabwe's CIO, Kevin Woods, admitted in a 2006 interview that he worked with these South African trained Super Zapu agents and that he was aware at the time that they were responsible for much of the dissident violence, including the murders of white farmers.<sup>27</sup>

26 Cabelly, who was the personal assistant to Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Chester Crocker, also told the South Africans after a visit to Harare, that 'the Mugabe government was not friendly to Moscow and was not extending aid to the ANC.' P.R. Killen to Ambassador Fourie (Washington, DC), 20 September 1983, SANA, DFA 1/156/3, vol. 38 Zimbabwe: Relations with South Africa.

27 The reporter asked Kevin Woods if he had witnessed the aftermath of Super ZAPU actions. Woods replied, 'Ja sure. Lots of times. I attended just about every white farmer who was murdered. That includes when Super ZAPU, the South African little addition to this tune, and when they came in and also started killing the white farmers, which was a bit tough to handle. I would have thought that they had been given instructions from down here [SA], of which I had been assured that they had been given instructions not to kill the white farmers, but just try to get together with the dissidents to really stir up the pot.' Kevin Woods Interview, *Carte Blanche*, July 23 2006. Transcript: <http://beta.mnet.co.za/carteblanche/Article.aspx?Id=3126>

## South African Diplomatic Views of the British Government's Lack of Response to the *Gukurahundi*

Geoff Hill, who has written extensively on the *Gukurahundi*, quotes a 2002 BBC Panorama documentary that investigated Britain's support for Mugabe during the *Gukurahundi*. Hill notes that

Sir Martin Ewans, High Commissioner in Harare at the time, admitted on camera that his instructions from London were to 'steer clear of it' when speaking to Mugabe. 'I think Matabeleland was a side issue,' he said. 'The real issues were much bigger. We were extremely interested that Zimbabwe should be a success story, and we were doing our best to help Mugabe and his people bring that about.'<sup>28</sup>

Given this avoidance of the issue from London, it is informative to examine how the South Africans in London read the British lack of concern with the *Gukurahundi*.

In early February 1983 Britain's Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Cranley Onslow, and Minister of State for Overseas Development, Timothy Raison, visited Harare. After the two returned to London, South African diplomats interviewed the head of the Central African Department of the FCO, 'Miss T Solseby' about Onslow's and Raison's visit. Given the South African diplomat's confidence in the absence of South African involvement in destabilizing Zimbabwe, they present a rather sanctimonious attitude about British support for Zimbabwe during the *Gukurahundi* and the trials of the white ZAF officers – both of which, to some extent, were influenced by South African destabilization efforts, as the sabotage of the Zimbabwean air force base had been supported by South Africa. While the exchange demonstrates South African diplomatic duplicity, it also demonstrates the FCO's defensiveness over their support for Mugabe and ZANU-PF. In the Cold War context, the British were able to look the other way concerning Fifth Brigade atrocities by offering further development funds and even new planes to replace those blown up by white Rhodesians working for the South Africans. The FCO's position, as projected through the South African narrative of the meetings, was that South Africa's destabilizing efforts in Zimbabwe continued to impede Britain's efforts to build a strong non-communist ally in Mugabe. Thus it was futile for South Africa to continue to criticize the FCO for co-operating with Mugabe. The following exchange reveals the strategies at work in Zimbabwe's ability to benefit from British Cold War priorities.

According to the report of the meeting, Solseby explained that the reasons for Onslow and Raison's visit had to do with 'the deterioration in the security situation in Matabeleland' which had 'caused the FCO to re-evaluate its views of the progress towards internal reconciliation'. In addition to the 'security situation in Matabeleland', other reasons for the visit were the allegations regarding white Zimbabwean air force officers being tortured by Zimbabwean CIO agents while in prison after the bombing and the destruction of aircraft at the Thornhill air force base.

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28 Geoff Hill, *The Battle for Zimbabwe: The Final Countdown* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2003), 83.

The result of the visit, according to the South African's record of what Solseby indicated to them, was that the UK is 'encouraged by Mugabe's continuing commitment to pursue a policy of reconciliation with Nkomo, the Matabeles in general and with the white community'. Based on these commitments from Mugabe, 'Britain has assured the Zimbabwe government that previous policies and aid pledges will be maintained.' Evidence of Britain's support came from Raison who 'signed an agreement for a 20 M [million] pound transfer'. Raison also reiterated Britain's commitment 'to provide 30 M [million] pounds for land resettlement ... as part of the overall commitment to provide 115M [illion] pounds in aid.'

Both Onslow and Raison pledged that Britain would assist Zimbabwe in rebuilding the ZAF, and although Raison did not mention South Africa by name, he did make 'a public statement which deplored acts of sabotage against Zimbabwe's road, rail and pipeline links as well as the ZAF'. In the interview, Solseby said that 'Onslow was concerned about allegations that South Africa was actively destabilizing Zimbabwe.' And while Onslow 'did not state his concerns publicly', he 'regards it as being significant that numerous Zimbabwean whites made such allegations to him.' The interpretation of Raison and Onslow's concerns, according to the South Africans, was that 'by destabilizing the country, South Africa is playing into the hands of the extremists in Mugabe's cabinet who advocate stronger repressive measures.'

The argument that the South Africans put to the FCO was that 'notwithstanding the attempts to blame South Africa for all their problems, are not Mugabe's own actions against Nkomo the determinant factor?' The South Africans 'pointed out that, no sooner had Onslow left Zimbabwe that the Zimbabwean government announced that it will move a motion of censure against Nkomo and ZAPU.' According to the report, the FCO's response was that 'while they "saw our point" we had to appreciate that the Zimbabwean situation "moved in cycles" – it had its ups and downs. This and similar platitudes were stated in a totally unconvincing way. Within a few hours of this interview, the latest atrocities committed by the Fifth Brigade in Matabeleland were major news in the electronic media.'<sup>29</sup> The South African analysis of Whitehall's views concluded: 'We cannot believe that the FCO is itself convinced that the situation is as "encouraging" as they say it to be. Nevertheless, the reputation of the [Thatcher] Government and the FCO remains closely linked with the diplomatic "success" in bringing Zimbabwe to recognised independence.' The FCO asked the South Africans if they had any information on

whether we knew if ZAPU and/or the Matabele dissidents were trying to get Soviet surrogates to support them. The FCO says it has some information to suggest this is the case. We replied that we did not know. We assume, however, that the object of the question may be to suggest that support for ZAPU would further aims of the Soviet Union.

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29 London to Pretoria, 'Zimbabwe: UK Views and Policy: Visit of Ministers Onslow and Raison', 8 February 1983, SANA, DFA, 1/156/1, vol. 125A. In addition, the topic of UK assistance in rebuilding the ZAF came up in the interview. The FCO indicated, 'Mugabe had promised Onslow that Air Marshal Pike and his fellow officers would be "speedily brought to trial." The UK had "confidence that the courts are still independent." Accordingly on this basis, Onslow gave the assurance that the UK would assist.' On 28 February the West Germans announced a financial co-operation package worth \$24.8 million and a technical co-operation package of \$4,240,000. See 'Bonn to give \$29 million', *The Herald*, 28 February 1983.

One of the more telling comments from the South African DFA diplomats in London, and consistent with the ‘ignorance’ of their Harare counterparts, was that the FCO had no response to their counter-arguments regarding destabilization. ‘This is in accordance with the current FCO attitude which is essentially a refusal to accept that South Africa is in no way involved. (e.g. Support for the MRM).’ The London representatives of the DFA continue to deny South Africa’s role in destabilization efforts in Zimbabwe, or even Mozambique. Roger Pfister has suggested that after the South African securocrats took over the control of the South African government in 1980, ‘the military significantly curtailed the DFA’s influence after 1981’.<sup>30</sup> However, the continued denial of South African diplomats in London and in Harare of South Africa’s involvement in Zimbabwe would seem to indicate the important ongoing role of the DFA in providing cover for the destabilization operations.

While the South Africans carried out a covert strategy of destabilization, they refused to provide any direct support for Ndebele nationalists. One case found in the DFA files is the passionate appeal from an Ndebele activist in London who sought out South African support for the creation of an Ndebele state through the supply of weapons to his organization. Amos Dlamini, who was working as a social worker in London in 1983, nonetheless made claims to a large network of followers in Matabeleland. Dlamini impressed the South African Embassy in London with his links to Nkomo and the ANC’s Oliver Tambo, but they were unconvinced by his appeal. They forwarded his letters and an account of their meeting to the DFA officials in South Africa. One DFA official noted in the margin that an appropriate response to the London embassy would be to say ‘we do not know Dlamini and do not give him any information. It may be a trap’.<sup>31</sup> The assumption was that the Zimbabwean government may have set Dlamini up to make a request for weapons in order to expose South Africa’s destabilization efforts. Once he realized that the South Africans were not going to take his appeal for support of an independent Ndebele nation seriously, Dlamini lashed out in a subsequent letter to the South Africans for choosing destabilization rather than support for the non-communist government he proposed. Dlamini concludes: ‘In effect therefore your Government prefers a containment by destabilisation rather than a containment by stabilisation ... South Africa is not a friend ... It is cold, aloof and full of spite for the black skinned person’.<sup>32</sup>

Given the realities of the *Gukurahundi* against the backdrop of the Cold War and South Africa’s regional strategy, the Ndebele were virtually ‘friendless’, while ZANU-PF managed to obtain the support of the West, the Soviets, and to a certain extent even South Africa so long as ZANU-PF and the Fifth Brigade continued to target ZAPU, ZIPRA, and by extension the ANC’s ability to operate in Zimbabwe.

### **Mugabe Responds to his Critics**

Perhaps one of the reasons why the British diplomats ‘steered clear’ of bringing up the *Gukurahundi* with Mugabe was that they knew Mugabe did not easily acquiesce

30 Roger Pfister, *Apartheid South Africa and African States: From Pariah to Middle Power, 1961-1994* (London: Tauris, 2005), 106.

31 Hand-written marginal notes found on London to Pretoria. ‘Visit to Embassy of Mr. Amos B.C. Dlamini: Future of Matabeleland: Possible Influx of Ndebele to S.A.’, 19830223/1530. No 219, SANA, DFA Zimbabwe: Political Situation and Developments, 1/151.1, vol 125A.

32 Amos Dlamini to Ambassador van Schoor, 1 June 1983. SANA, DFA Zimbabwe: Political Situation and Developments, 1/151.1, vol. 125A.

to their criticisms. His style of diplomacy was always to push stridently the limits of diplomacy and meet threats with counter-threats. This strategy had, after all, brought him to prominence at Geneva in 1976 and pushed him forward as the favourite of the Americans during the Lancaster House talks.

In late 1983 the white air force officers who had been acquitted by the Zimbabwean courts because their confessions had been obtained through torture were detained by the Zimbabwean government as threats to the state, based on the same detention laws the Rhodesians had used against Mugabe and Nkomo in the 1960s and 1970s. This action produced a much larger outcry in London than had the *Gukurahundi*. When the UK began to suggest that funds would be withheld until after the release of the air force pilots charged with treason (and not about *Gukurahundi* atrocities), Mugabe shot back in the local press. 'If the British do not give us money to buy land we will not tax the people of Zimbabwe to buy back their own inheritance. We will just take the land and not pay for it.'<sup>33</sup>

US support for Mugabe as part of Chester Crocker's 'constructive engagement' policy with South Africa came under criticism in the US Senate in 1983. Andy DeRoche notes that it was conservative Senator Jesse Helms who challenged Crocker's 1983 budget request for \$85 million to go to Zimbabwe in 1984. Helms asked Crocker if US funds would "go to support a one-party Marxist system that Mr. Mugabe is building?" Crocker reminded Helms that the United States had pledged a three-year total of \$225 million to Zimbabwe back in 1981. To some extent, this was a matter of the United States keeping its word. DeRoche concludes, '[d]espite Crocker's efforts, Congress approved only \$40 million to Zimbabwe for 1984.'<sup>34</sup>

A good example of how Mugabe's strategy worked to tie the *Gukurahundi* to external destabilization efforts can be seen in his speech to religious leaders in Harare in April 1983. After detailing attempts by white Zimbabweans, Bishop Muzorewa's UANC, and Nkomo's ZAPU to attack his government, Mugabe states: 'The list is long. The common thread in all of this has been the desperate attempt, often backed by South Africa, to destabilize our young republic with the ultimate object of overthrowing my Government.' Mugabe then lists the crimes of dissidents he characterized as South African allies:

These elements, who now see South Africa as their ally, have killed and maimed hundreds of innocent people, kidnapped innocent Zimbabweans and foreign visitors to our country, burned thousands of dollars worth of both Government and private property and seriously threatened the completion of Government projects designed to bring food, water, schools, health facilities and other benefits to the people.

<sup>33</sup> 'Mr. Mugabe again accused Britain of interfering in Zimbabwe's affairs by demanding the release of four white Air Force officers who are being held. Three of them were cleared of sabotage charges, while the fourth had not been charged.' Norma Kirkham, 'Land Threat by Mugabe', *Telegraph*, 9 October 1983, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Andrew DeRoche, *Black, White and Chrome*, 321. DeRoche also details how in 1984 Frank Wisner, the Deputy Secretary for African Affairs who had negotiated with Mugabe at Geneva in 1976, was defending Mugabe's record at a House subcommittee meeting. Wisner 'emphasized that Zimbabwe remained an important model for the rest of southern Africa, both politically and economically. Whites and blacks were working together in the government, and the private sector maintained significant autonomy despite Mugabe's socialist rhetoric.' *Ibid.*, 323-34.

After having associated the crimes of the dissidents with South Africa, and also blamed them for the failures of the security state to mobilize resources for development, Mugabe rationalizes the *Gukurahundi* as a necessary step to defend 'our sovereignty'.

We shall proceed with ever increasing vigour to crush them. Let us reiterate in this regard that our consciences are very clear. ... in these circumstances, my Government has full moral – not to say political and constitutional – authority to wipe out the scourge that would debilitate and finally destroy our sovereignty and unitary nationhood.<sup>35</sup>

Mugabe then goes on to give the rationale for what has more recently been called 'Patriotic History' to justify violence against the Ndebele.<sup>36</sup> Answering criticism that the Fifth Brigade violated human rights, Mugabe answered:

Our military operations in parts of Matabeleland have cast doubt on our commitment to these rights. May I seize the opportunity of reminding them of our brief history. For many years, some of us, refusing to yield on matters of basic principle, were incarcerated for our total commitment to freedom and justice in circumstances in which many of our present critics were cringing in fear. And that is not all, for our unyielding dedication to those human rights also bade us [to] take to arms in a bitter protracted national struggle in which several leaders, commanders and thousands of our young men and women lost their lives. Surely, these credentials give us better title than our 'holier than thou' critics to sermonize others, including them, on what true commitment to human rights means ... Accordingly, the struggle against political bandits and their collaborators will continue unabated until every corner of Matabeleland has been rid of every dissident element.<sup>37</sup>

Writing for the *Guardian* in early July 1983, Andrew Meldrum reported of the continued trauma and fear in Matabeleland, as 'Church and humanitarian groups blamed the army for slaughtering more than 2,000 people in February and March in its campaign to control anti-Government dissidents.' Schools had reopened, but teachers told Meldrum how soldiers kidnapped students and 'kept them at their camp for two weeks to teach them loyalty to Mr. Mugabe's Zanu party'. Once they returned, they were tasked with teaching their classmates pro-Mugabe songs during all night *pungwes*, or meetings.<sup>38</sup> The use of the Fifth Brigade was therefore more than

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35 There is, of course, an historical irony in some of Mugabe's words, such as the following reference to ZANU-PF permitting ZAPU to enter government after the latter had lost an election. 'In the circumstances in which a party, having lost the elections, was nevertheless brought into Government and its rights as a political party have been scrupulously respected by a Government that has faithfully adhered to a Constitution which represents an historic compromise accepted by all parties ...' Government of Zimbabwe, Office of the Prime Minister, 'Transformation is a Process Not a Goal - PM', 234/83/PR, 5 April 1983. SANA DFA 1/156/1 vol. 127 Zimbabwe: Political Situation and Development 1/4/83 to 30/4/83.

36 See Terence Ranger, 'Nationalist Historiography, Patriotic History and the History of the Nation: The Struggle over the Past in Zimbabwe', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30, 2 (June 2004); Norma Kriger, 'From Patriotic Memories to "Patriotic History" in Zimbabwe, 1990-2005', *Third World Quarterly*, 27, 6 (2006); Blessing-Miles Tendi, *Making History in Mugabe's Zimbabwe: Politics, Intellectuals and the Media* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010); Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 'Patriots, Puppets, Dissidents and the Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion in Contemporary Zimbabwe', *Eastern Africa Social Science Review*, 24, 1 (January 2008), 81-108.

37 Government of Zimbabwe, Office of the Prime Minister, 'Transformation is a Process Not a Goal - PM', 234/83/PR, 5 April 1983. SANA, DFA 1/156/1, vol. 127, Zimbabwe: Political Situation and Development 1/4/83 to 30/4/83.

38 Andrew Meldrum, 'Fear continues to rule in Matabeleland', *Guardian*, 5 July 1983, 7.

dealing with the dissident threat. It was a campaign to destroy support for ZAPU in areas of the country where it still had a strong following.

In September 1983, while the Fifth Brigade was still deployed and had established torture and death camps in the two Matabeleland provinces and the Midlands, Mugabe was at the White House meeting with President Reagan.<sup>39</sup> The official press release of their closing remarks is instructive. After welcoming Mugabe to the White House, President Reagan noted how Mugabe's 'wise leadership has been a crucial factor in healing the wounds of civil war and developing a new nation with new opportunities'. Reagan compared Zimbabwe to the United States, echoing the Carter Administration's earlier vision of Zimbabwe as a multiracial democracy.

The United States and Zimbabwe have much in common. We both came to independence through a revolutionary process. We are both multiracial societies. And our constitutions offer protection to all our citizens, black and white, ensuring their political freedoms as well as their individual rights ... We look to Zimbabwe for leadership in southern Africa ... Zimbabwe can provide a firm foundation of economic viability and political stability and serve as an inspiration in its part of the world.

Mugabe used the opportunity to offer Reagan and the US government 'our heartfelt thanks and appreciation for that support which the United States has given us all along the way'. After noting differences between the US and Zimbabwe on the US plan to link Namibian independence to the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola, Mugabe states: 'We all are opposed – we both are opposed to interference in the domestic affairs of a country by another.' Mugabe reassured the Americans that

We are determined that a nonracial society shall exist in Zimbabwe and that racism, tribalism, regionalism, and whatever other 'isms' – these are things of the past. What we would uphold as fundamental is that principle which binds us together and makes us one regardless of our race, colour, or creed.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

Careful not to engage the South Africans and not to move too quickly to bring in the Soviets and Cubans, Mugabe managed to create his own Cold War shield that allowed him and ZANU-PF to settle their longstanding rivalry with ZAPU and Nkomo.<sup>41</sup> The testimonies of victims clearly indicate that outside of the 400 ZAPU dissidents and the 100 South African supported 'Super ZAPU', there was very little in the way of direct military resistance to the Fifth Brigade. In fact, the Fifth Brigade

39 For a detailed description of these camps, see *Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe: A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands, 1980-1988* (London: Hurst and Company, 2007), 223-31, 363-5.

40 Ronald Reagan, 'Remarks of the President and Prime Minister Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe Following Their Meetings', 13 September 1983. See Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=41833>>.

41 Pfister suggests that South Africa used the Cold War to create its own 'protective shield' in the same period. 'Crucially, in 1981, US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Chester Crocker, introduced the Cuban Linkage, stipulating that South Africa would only have to leave Namibia once the Cuban troops had withdrawn from Angola. In a sense, an international protective shield had replaced South Africa's *cordon sanitaire*. The international backing of Pretoria began to crumble from the mid-1980s, when the Reagan and Thatcher policies attracted both domestic and external criticism.' Roger Pfister, *Apartheid South Africa and African States*, 105-6.

did little to engage with the armed dissidents, and there were certainly sufficient ZNA forces already deployed in the effected provinces to engage the dissidents if that had been the goal. South Africa's Super ZAPU was also not in itself capable of defeating the regular ZNA forces, let alone the Fifth Brigade.<sup>42</sup> Defense of ZAPU would have been too costly for the Soviets or the South Africans.

The diplomatic strategies of Nkomo and others in ZAPU failed as they had no external allies by January 1983, a reality Mugabe was aware of because he now had the tacit support of the Soviets as well as the support of the British and Americans. Commenting on the *Gukurahundi* and the arrests of ZAPU leaders in 1983, Vladimir Shubin explains, 'all these developments were of concern to us, although we were not in a position to influence them'.<sup>43</sup> Like the Americans and British, the Soviets were worried that the South Africans would exploit the situation. Soviet support for ZAPU, and therefore the ANC's MK, in south-western Zimbabwe on South Africa's border would risk drawing South Africa's military into a direct conflict. Investing in their relations with Mugabe and ZANU-PF was seen as the better strategy for the Soviets. It was against this backdrop of Cold War stalemate that Mugabe and others in ZANU-PF found the space to carry out the *Gukurahundi* in order to defeat ZAPU and consolidate ZANU-PF's control of the state.

The diplomatic record for British involvement in the *Gukurahundi* will be available soon, perhaps by 2013-2014. The US record may be available soon as well. But the type of histories these files will produce will need to question traditional Cold War assumptions. The *Gukurahundi* is a tragic chapter in southern African history that still requires a great deal of historical work. This history will have political ramifications in the future, not only for restorative and restitutive justice in Zimbabwe, but also for a transformation of Zimbabwean politics away from the ZANU-PF model that has dominated for the past thirty years. American and British support for Mugabe, particularly to the extent that military aid and training was provided to assist in the killings of civilians, will require further investigation. Similar to the recent court cases in the UK for victims of the British involvement in Mau Mau, or research on American and British support for Paul Kagame's Rwandan forces, there may in fact be the possibility of larger culpability from a number of external forces in the case of the *Gukurahundi* that still needs to be explored.<sup>44</sup>

This preliminary reading of the South African DFA files, while understanding their incompleteness given declassification and sanitizing issues in the apartheid-era security sector, suggests that South Africa's motivations in 1983 were not as straightforward as ZANU-PF and the many Western anti-apartheid activists and analysts suggested at the time. As the South Africans observed, the ZANU-PF logic was that since South Africa supported UNITA and RENAMO, international audiences could be convinced that South Africa was behind all ZAPU dissident activities. This logic masked the close co-operation between ZANU-PF and the SADF in a campaign against the ANC's MK. The relationship between ZANU-PF and the ANC would only improve in the mid-1980s when Thabo Mbeki negotiated a better relationship with Mugabe. Initial attempts in 1980 to obtain ZANU-

42 Jocelyn Alexander, JoAnn McGregor & Terence Ranger, *Violence and Memory*, 189.

43 Shubin, *The Hot 'Cold War*', 189.

44 Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005); Hazel Cameron, *Britain's Hidden Role in the Rwandan Genocide: The Cat's Paw*. (London: Routledge, 2012).

PF support for the ANC, according to Tor Sellström, were met with derision by Minister Mnangagwa who told the Swedish ambassador in Harare that Mugabe's government 'found no reason to embrace ANC' because it was 'only after ZANU's electoral victory that the ANC had shown interest in bilateral relations'.<sup>45</sup>

By the late 1980s, the Soviets were also more comfortable in Harare and there was even talk of selling MIG fighter planes to Mugabe, something that would have threatened South Africa's air superiority for the first time. The deal never went through, but it indicates how quickly power relations began to shift as the Western nations, largely because of domestic anti-apartheid pressure, turned against Pretoria. The subsequent dramatic end of the Soviet Union created a situation where Mugabe would once again turn to Western institutions for financial and military support.

The first three years of Zimbabwe's history were extremely costly for some Zimbabweans, treacherous and lethal for others. The Western Cold War priorities of reaching a settlement, holding an election, providing large amounts of aid to keep Zimbabwe pro-West, and then turning away from any responsibility for what happens *inside* Zimbabwe cannot be ignored. As Zimbabweans continue to struggle for political rights, as well as peace and security, the history of the Gukurahundi will remain contested and alive. It would be overly simplistic to view the Gukurahundi tragedy as solely the product of a particular type of Cold War rationalization. Nevertheless, diplomatic historians need to play a role in historicizing this tragedy as part of the *longue durée* of Zimbabwean, South African and southern African foreign relations.

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45 Tor Sellström, *Sweden and National Liberation in Southern Africa, Vol. II: Solidarity and Assistance, 1970-1994* (Uppsala, 2002), 683; Vladimir Shubin, *The Hot 'Cold War'*. The animosity between the ANC and ZANU(PF) in the 1970s and 1980s seems lost on some current political alliances of liberation movements. For a critique of these current alliances, see Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 'Reconstructing the Implications of Liberation Struggle History on SADC Mediation in Zimbabwe', *South African Foreign Policy and African Drivers Programme* (SAILA) (Occasional Paper No. 94, September 2011).