

Biography and History in Zimbabwe

The Army and Politics in Zimbabwe: Mujuru the Liberation Fighter and Kingmaker

By Blessing-Miles Tendi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. 348. \$120.00, hardcover (ISBN: 9781108472890); \$32.99, paperback (ISBN: 9781108460729); \$26.00, e-book (ISBN: 9781108585767).

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This is a biography of one of Zimbabwe's most celebrated heroes of the liberation struggle that also offers a serious engagement with the historiography of that war. It will be one of the most influential books to be published on this subject in years. It is riveting and has a throbbing pace presented with a style accessible even to the non-specialist reader. It has had an instant impact, especially in Zimbabwe, where it set ablaze nearly all social media platforms and confirmed Tendi as a leading public intellectual. The book continues to fly off the shelves of many bookstores like a work of fiction. In many ways it reads like one, not least because it naturally ends with the puzzle of the mysterious death of this general, but also because it runs several threads through the text that unfold like a plot in a murder novel.

The first such thread is superstition. Solomon Mujuru is introduced as an ill-fated young man stalked by the threat of fire from birth to death, but he is also an underdog, an illiterate who fights his way to recognition and heroism to spite those who dared to undermine him, be they fellow herd-boys in his Chikomba birthplace or other common soldiers in the battlefield. Readers are primed to anticipate his fate as the story of his life is unpacked as if it were all premeditated. The first and last chapters of the book are duly christened 'Fireborn I' and 'Fireborn II' to qualify this point. Yet Rex Nhongo, the guerrilla leader that Solomon becomes, is also endowed with the inimitable powers of intuition and premonition, foretelling possible dangers and counterrevolutionary intrigues in the struggle and thus being instrumental, nearly all the time, in thwarting or pre-empting them. He foresaw two of the most significant rebellions in the Zimbabwean African National Union (ZANU) party, the Nhari and Hamadziripi Rebellions of 1974 and 1978, respectively.

The second thread holds that Nhongo was a *deus ex machina* who always appeared at the right moment with the right solutions in the story of ZANU. Tendi endows him with the transformative attributes of 'cautious pragmatism, non-partisanship and moderation' (74). He is a cautious 'political double-dealer', who plays 'king-maker' by assuring the ascendancy of Robert Mugabe to the leadership of ZANU and the return of Josiah Tongogara to that of the army. Proving the utility of biography for advancing academic political science is Tendi's great triumph: demonstrating that political life is ultimately also personal life, and requiring necessarily subjective attention to individuals and not just analysis of sociopolitical structures.

But in triumphant biography there is always vulnerability. The overdiligent biographer can identify so closely with the intentions and pretensions of his subject that he lapses into make-believe stories. Tendi tells us that Nhongo made Mugabe king due to Nhongo's respect for party hierarchy, and because Mugabe, who was his distant relative, was all that Nhongo was not: namely highly educated, eloquent, and urbane. Nhongo, it is argued, supported party supremacy over the gun. He is also portrayed as immune to other evils pervading ZANU, such as tribalism, while remaining

bound by loyalty to his superiors. The argument of the book rests on these qualifications during the war but these are then stretched to fit Nhongo's career after Zimbabwe's independence. Here Tendi is less successful.

The book produces no new evidence for all this except what is already in the public domain for the war period. The author resorts to search and destroy tactics to target fellow scholars who differ with his interpretations of the same evidence, although his own conclusions, in many instances, appear to be pure conjecture, personal opinions, or simply educated guesswork. He has no interview with Nhongo himself and relies on what Tendi vaguely describes as 'Solomon Mujuru Private Material' frequently without any indication of its nature or hint that questions of reliability and bias have been addressed. The greater part of the book is based on interviews that are nearly all anonymized alphabetically in what appears to be a consistent effort to bar readers from establishing the veracity of their accounts rather than protecting the identity of the informants. This does not apply to British and Mozambican military officers, or senior ZANU Patriotic Front officials or security personnel, despite the latter's standing and/or variable security in Zimbabwean politics, who are all positively identified. This inconsistency is deliberate, perhaps to show off the author's proximity to the who is who in Zimbabwe's military and political elite, as well as his privileged access to their corridor gossip. In the end, such academic posturing leaves the author as a willing participant in the ZANU power politics, if not himself a victim.

There are indeed hazards of telling the story of Solomon Mujuru in such a saintly way. For one, it means the other people involved in these struggles must come across as either passive victims or villains. The first such figure is Tongogara, whose ruthlessness is based on the account of nameless Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) cadres who compare him unfavourably to Nhongo (141–2). Tongogara's tribalism — read barbarism — is used to justify a Mugabe-Nhongo alliance, otherwise Tongogara tolerated Nhongo 'because he was a fighter!' Tongogara's aggression and volatile temper is attributed to his taking marijuana and alcohol, yet Nhongo's drunkenness and distribution of marijuana to combatants during battle is an exemplary case of the 'synergistic relationship between drinking and combat!' Tongogara panders to the 'white gaze' by performing behaviours and sensibilities acceptable to whites while Nhongo was 'difficult' with them. Tendi uses Edgar Puryear's classification of generals to show Nhongo as a better general than Tongogara without using evidence from the war.

The second is Josiah Tungamirayi, Mujuru's contemporary and competitor who Tendi judges 'responsible' for starting the Gukuruhundi campaign in Matabeleland when Rex was on leave in Pakistan in 1982. Tungamirayi is also charged with hatching the intrigues to lobby for Nhongo's retirement. But more on him below.

Third is Constantine Chiwenga, whose dispute with Nhongo allegedly started off following a case of the latter snatching the former's wife. Tendi lines up Chiwenga, the cuckold, for humiliation each time his name features in the book, presenting him as unfit as an officer for plagiarising a promotions test, and a coward for attempting suicide. For Tendi, Chiwenga was not a professional but a 'political' commander of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces. There is no interview of Chiwenga himself and all this is based on interviews with unnamed persons. Chiwenga, of course, played kingmaker, after Nhongo's demise, to Nhongo's nemesis Emmerson Mnangagwa, the fourth villain of the book. Mnangagwa was yet another business rival of Nhongo, who is also depicted as Mugabe's lapdog and runner. Tendi deploys a series of anonymous references and quotations to reveal damaging information about Mnangagwa's war credentials and his appetite for power. Lastly, Tendi characterises Mugabe as an ungrateful beneficiary of Nhongo's benevolence, whose indifferent, if not jovial attitude to the news of Mujuru's death — Mugabe dismissed Mujuru's immolation as an accident of a drunkard before the official inquiry into his death, and delivered what Tendi considers an unbecoming eulogy — is further testament to this ingratitude.

There is overkill of the 'everyone else but Nhongo' narrative in the book which deteriorates to apology. This limitation is particularly striking when Tendi considers Nhongo's tenure as the

head of the Zimbabwean National Army (ZNA). Nhongo was a 'high-functioning alcoholic' who met his targets, even if this meant coming to work and giving orders in an inebriated state (170–1). Tendi blames corruption in the ZNA under Nhongo on Mugabe's model of patronage, not on Nhongo himself. Tendi blames Nhongo's philandering variously on Zimbabwean society's patriarchal norms, his irresistible charm, his search for a son, his 'displaced' life, and lack of a mother figure in childhood. Because of his Zimbabwean People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) roots, Tendi argues that Nhongo was a hero who rescued Shona members of ZIPRA who had been sidelined from promotion or inclusion in the ZNA by the Zimbabwe African Political Union (ZAPU) leadership of Ndebele extraction. Yet even where Nhongo was directly involved in the decision to purge ZIPRA elements from the army, Tendi absolves him, suggesting instead that the fault should be passed on to complicit ZIPRA agents in the echelons of power like Jevan Maseko.

The same is true of the so-called 'ZANLAFication' of the ZNA. Tendi attributes this process to Josiah Tungamirayi, arguing that Nhongo was not involved because he was not as 'fanatical' as Tungamirayi who was ZANU's 'Political Commissar' during the war and had 'idiosyncrasies' that ZANU PF approved. It was Tungamirayi who deployed the Fifth Brigade — the military unit that committed mass atrocities in Matabeleland and the Midlands provinces, with Lionel Dyck in charge — not Nhongo, who Tendi insists never acted less than rationally. Even when he returned from leave Nhongo 'knew what 5 brigade was doing but was not in charge of it' (200). It reported directly to Mnangagwa. To his credit, Tendi identifies and interviews some Fifth Brigade commanders, yet he ultimately disregards their accounts in favour of ghost informants and British officers. Tendi's whole point is to give Nhongo responsibility for the 'minimal violence' of the ZNA in Matabeleland as overall commander of the army, but not that of the Fifth Brigade. This sounds like an absurdity. It is hard to reconcile a consistent image of Nhongo in this narrative: at one moment he is an astute general, working behind the scenes, involved in everything, and in the next, he is a lame duck.

Ultimately, the main argument of the book must be submitted to a pressure test. Was Nhongo a kingmaker? If so, which kings did he make? Mugabe perhaps? Tendi lays out a series of interviews that suggest Nhongo's manoeuvres were critical to making Mozambique's President Samora Machel reverse his marginalisation of Mugabe and agree instead to bring down the commanders who were in Mugabe's way in the crucial 1975–6 period. However, Mugabe's rise could equally be attributable to many other people and forces throughout the history of ZANU PF: ZIPA cadres; ZANU veterans in Mpima Prison; Zambia; ZANU intellectuals in the diaspora, some of whom started the pro-Mugabe propaganda well before Mugabe was released by Machel; the Zimbabwe People's Movement running a ZANU underground initiative in Rhodesia; the leaders of Frontline States themselves. The list is endless.

Moreover, the more one looks at it, Mugabe's success is most plausible because of his own agency. Central to Mugabe's political genius was his capacity to get everyone around him trying to find ways to please or appease him and to bring each other down. The limits of Nhongo's own agency in the face of Mugabe's political shrewdness are apparent in how well Mugabe held Nhongo at bay throughout his postindependence life, indeed right up until his death. Could Nhongo propel his wife Joice Mujuru to be Zimbabwe's vice president and consequently make her the next president outside Mugabe's scheme of succession politics? This was highly unlikely. He was instead used by Mugabe to fend off Mnangagwa and, when that was achieved (and following his own death) his wife was discarded like an expended cartridge. Could Nhongo make a king out of Simba Makoni to oust Mugabe? Again, improbable, as Nhongo turned against Makoni's Mavambo/Kusile/Dawn project and betrayed him at the last minute, sensing a Mugabe backlash. So, if Nhongo was indeed a kingmaker, he only achieved it once, and mainly because it was the king's plan that he should do so.

In the entire narrative Tendi fails to call out Nhongo for who he really was: a betrayer who was eventually betrayed, while basking under the illusion of being a 'king-maker'. Maybe, if Nhongo had seen things differently, he could have seen his enemies plot his 'fireborn' end. As the final chapter in

the book so ably demonstrates, his death may have been no accident. Indeed, this turns out to be the best and most convincing evidence-based chapter of the book. It is devoid of all the mythology and baggage and can serve as the foundation of a more critical life history of Solomon Mujuru.

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Armies and Identities in Southern Africa

Apartheid's Black Soldiers: Un-national Wars and Militaries in Southern Africa

By Lennart Bolliger. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2021. Pp. 240. \$80.00, hardcover (ISBN: 9780821424551); \$34.95, paperback (ISBN: 9780821425114); e-book (ISBN: 9780821447413).

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This empirically rich book joins a growing group of scholarly works that probe the 'un-national' characteristics of Southern Africa's wars of decolonization by examining the experiences of Black members of apartheid South Africa's security forces, who fought on South Africa's side in Namibia's war of decolonization and the Angolan civil war. Bolliger engages an interdisciplinary literature on soldiers and police in Africa and elsewhere and traces how rank-and-file Africans' experiences of training and drill, racial hierarchies, and their units' mission and ideology shaped disparate military cultures. What results are what he calls 'un-national' histories that challenge popular understandings of these wars as struggles for 'national liberation'. Such interpretations remain prominent in popular and academic discourses in and about Southern Africa and, in particular, Namibia.¹

Bolliger engages the literatures of 'un-national' liberation and African soldiers and police together to original effect. Like historiographies of intermediaries and the 'middle ground of colonialism', 'un-national' histories examine individual experiences and motivations that run against the binary framework of resistance and collaboration. Luise White and Miles Larmer, who coined the term 'un-national', emphasize 'how much of national liberation took place in and from spaces that were categorically different from the national frame'.² The two literatures thus link people and spaces that unsettle the dominant framing of Southern Africa's wars of decolonization as, in Bolliger's words, 'struggles fought by and for Africans against settler and colonial state militaries'

¹For Namibia, see SWAPO's official history: SWAPO of Namibia, *To Be Born a Nation: The Liberation Struggle for Namibia* (Luanda, 1981). There is also a body of literature that draws a teleological link between resistance against the northern contract labor system and Namibian nationalism. See: R. Moorsom, 'Underdevelopment, contract labour and worker consciousness in Namibia, 1915–72', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 4:1 (1977), 52–87; A. D. Cooper, 'The institutionalisation of contract labour in Namibia', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 25:1 (1999), 121–38.

²L. White and M. Larmer, 'Introduction: mobile soldiers and the un-national liberation of Southern Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 40:6 (2014), 1271–4. Also see: J. Alexander, P. Israel, M. Larmer, and R. Soares de Oliveira (eds.), 'Liberation beyond the nation', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 46:5 (2020), 821–1074.