

History: Rhodesia's 1970's "Dirty War": A Tale of False Flag Terror and War Crimes

By [Adeyinka Makinde](#)

Global Research, October 19, 2020

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#)

The war fought during the 1970s in the nation state formerly known as Rhodesia was an asymmetric conflict which pitted the Rhodesian Security Forces against the militias of Black African liberation movements, most prominent of which were ZANLA and ZAPU. Alternately known as the Rhodesian Bush War and the Zimbabwe War of Liberation, it was characterised by an unceasing brutality which claimed the lives of many non-combatants. Both government and guerrilla forces participated in the brutalisation of civilians. However, with the passage of time, many Old Rhodesians, who feel vindicated by Zimbabwe's political and economic malaise, have sought to characterise the war as having been prosecuted by the White minority government in an ethical, rules-abiding manner. Among its forces, the [Selous Scouts](#) is often touted as a model of martial efficiency and resourcefulness, whose codes of behaviour were beyond reproach. This could not be further from the truth. While the Scouts were effective in destroying enemy guerrillas, they were at the heart of a counter-insurgency strategy which waged chemical warfare not only against guerrillas, but the wider African population. The unit was also responsible for initiating False Flag attacks which it sought to blame on Black Nationalist groups; a mode of operation which while central to its founding aim of providing the Rhodesian state a dimension of psychological warfare, its supporters erroneously claim was alien to the unit.

The Selous Scouts were a multi-racial unit formed in 1973 to wage unconventional warfare. The methods employed included infiltration, assassination, abduction, torture, sabotage, and blackmail. The unit committed "False Flag" atrocities as part and parcel of their modus operandi. The Rhodesian "Bush War", as is the case with a multitude of wars, had a psychological dimension in regard to which the Selous Scouts, with their expertise in "pseudo operations", consistently undertook missions which relied on deception, and such deception was utilised to either kill a large number of the insurgent enemy (Black Nationalist) or to kill specific civilian targets in order to blame the Black African insurgents.

One example of a Selous Scout False Flag operation was conducted in February 1980. Named "Operation HECTIC", it involved two Black African Selous Scouts named Lieutenant Edward Piringodo and Corporal Morgan Moyo bombing churches in the Salisbury area. Piringodo and Moyo used explosives captured from ZANLA guerrillas to blow up two churches; taking care to leave behind ZANU literature near the ruins caused by each blast. However, both Scouts died after a third bomb they were carrying prematurely exploded inside the car they were driving. They were near an Anglican church at the time of the final explosion which took their lives.

"Operation HECTIC" was designed to discredit Robert Mugabe's ZANU at the forthcoming elections by making his organisation appear to be anti-Christian and anti-freedom of religion. The irony is that although influenced by Marxist-Leninist thinking, Mugabe did not

totally cast off his Jesuit upbringing. For instance, he named one of his younger children, a son Bellarmine, after a not-very-well-known Catholic Saint.

The 1980 operation suggests that the frequent allegations made by Black Nationalists that the Selous Scouts carried out atrocities against African villages and Catholic missions are extremely credible. They would have used Black African members of the force in the way Piringodo and Moyo were used to disguise themselves as guerrillas to carry out such atrocities. Mugabe, who revelled at Piringodo and Moyo being "[caught and destroyed in their own devilish trap](#)", specifically blamed the Selous Scouts for having carried out the attack against the Catholic missionaries in February 1977, as well as for the gunning down of 27 Black African tea workers on a White-owned estate in the Honde Valley in late 1976.

Why would the Selous Scouts have committed these deeds? The answer is that alongside the war of bullets and bombs was the propaganda war. The Rhodesian state sought to discredit the Black African guerrillas among the Black populace, as well as in the international court of public opinion. History is replete with examples of states using militarised sections to carry out acts of terror. The Red Hand, the terror organisation which assassinated members of the Algerian FLN, and its West German arms suppliers was a creation of the French Secret Service. And the Military Reaction Force (MRF), a construct of British Army Intelligence, was formed by [Brigadier Frank Kitson](#) to not only gun down Irish Republican guerrillas, but to stage operations that would discredit them.

This does not mean that the disputed atrocities may not have been committed by Black African guerrillas who murdered those who they considered to be traitors to their cause, but it ought to encourage those disbelieving Old Rhodesians to remove their rose-tinted lenses and confront the brutalities perpetrated by their side.

Lt. Colonel Reid-Daly, the Commander of the Selous Scouts, was a veteran of the Malaya conflict during which time he would have seen and imbibed the more nefarious aspects of counterinsurgency employed by the British Army. While Frank Kitson's name is often projected as the key authority in the practice of British Army counter-insurgency, the foremost exponent of what came to be known as anti-Maoist rural counter-insurgency warfare, was applied in Malaya by General Robert Thompson.

The Selous Scouts were created precisely to conduct ruthless and "ungentlemanly war". In fact, the unit came to be known for "murder, rape, smuggling and poaching", and its members gained a reputation as "psychopathic killers" and "vainglorious extroverts".

The Rhodesian military began to develop counter-insurgency chemical warfare in the early 1970s, and the Scouts metamorphosed from being a tracking unit to being the central purveyors of the Rhodesian state's chemical warfare strategy. Glenn Cross's 1999 book, *Plague Wars* gives a good account of this aspect of the war. An academic article written in 2002 by Ian Martinez for Third World Quarterly which was titled "The History of the Use of Bacteriological and Chemical Agents during Zimbabwe's Liberation War of 1965-80 by Rhodesian Forces" is also very enlightening about the role of chemical warfare in the counter-insurgency.

The Selous Scouts were instructed to poison watering holes, stagnant water, slow moving streams, and other bodies of water near guerrilla camps inside Mozambique, near the border. In one operation, the Selous Scouts poisoned a well in Mozambique which led to the

deaths of at least 200 civilians because the well was the only source of drinking water in the area. The Scouts were also instructed to spread cholera. Under cover of "Operation Long Walk" in August 1973, members of the unit poured cholera agents into the Ruya River. This also caused deaths among innocent civilians in Mozambique but was discontinued because the agent dissipated quickly in water, and it could spread back to Rhodesia including areas where the Scouts were operating.

The unit was responsible for injecting thallium into canned meat which was given to insurgents under the deception that they were being supplied from a friendly source. In one situation, the guerrillas gave their poisoned canned meat to villagers on Tribal Trust Land who were short of food, and the villagers subsequently died.

The authorities acquired double agents within the structures of the Black African guerrillas who soaked clothing and food in toxic organophosphates. This resulted in many newly recruited revolutionaries dying on the journey to guerrilla training camps in Zambia and Mozambique. This meant that those who had not yet engaged in attacking the Rhodesian state (they could after all have given up or have been told they were not guerrilla material by instructors) were pre-emptively murdered in a cruel manner. Also, because the double-agent perpetrators could be easily fingered, they were themselves killed.

Those captured Black African guerrillas who the Selous Scouts could not "turn" were either subjected to an extrajudicial execution or were used as human guinea pigs in biological experimentation, which of course inevitably led to their deaths.

While certain Old Rhodesians may claim an 'end justifies the means' rationale, the results contradict their frequent argument that the war was fought to defend Black Africans as much as Whites, for the Rhodesian authorities did not seem to mind that their chemical warfare programme was by the end of the 1970s causing health problems among the Black civilian population.

In 1979, Rhodesia recorded the largest recorded outbreak of anthrax, a development which has been interpreted as the deliberate use of a weaponised biological agent. Ken Flower, Chief of Rhodesia's Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) and a CIO officer named Henrik Ellert confirmed in their memoirs that the Ian Smith-led regime used biological and chemical weapons against the guerrillas, against rural Black Africans to prevent their support of the guerrillas, and against livestock like cattle in order to reduce rural food stocks.

The application of chemical warfare[1], at the heart of which was the Selous Scouts amounted to war crimes because it arguably contravened The Hague Convention of 1907. Furthermore, the deliberate and systematic killing of livestock in Black African populated areas infringed Common Article III of the Geneva Convention, 1949. Additionally, the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) of 1972 embodied the renunciation by the world community of nations of the use of biological weapons against human beings.

There are of course difficulties associated with specific application to Rhodesia which was not a signatory to the Geneva Convention and, after its Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965, was an illegal regime. Nonetheless, the use of such weapons in both internal and international conflicts is now recognised to be a violation of customary international law. The problem of affixing the successor state to Rhodesia, Zimbabwe, with the responsibility of these crimes can be overcome by affixing responsibility of these actions onto individuals who acted on behalf of the Rhodesian state. This would mean that members

of the Rhodesian Security Forces including those who served with the Selous Scouts could be prosecuted by a Nuremberg-style court for a range of offences including the murder and ill-treatment of prisoners of war, the use of biological weapons of war against both civilian and military targets as well as compelling prisoners of war to serve with a hostile army.

It should be noted that as part of the war of deception, the deaths of humans and cattle from these poisoning incidents were used as Rhodesian government propaganda to blame the guerrillas. Thus, part of the strategy of the state was geared towards sowing discord between the insurgents and rural populations. On the one hand, villagers were conditioned to believe that food shortages were been caused by guerrilla activity, while the insurgents were encouraged to believe that their food was being poisoned by villagers. In several instances, they launched attacks on those villages they held responsible.

Admissions by Selous Scouts veterans in regard to these actions and objectives have been rare, but a U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) cable from Harare to Washington D.C. in 1990 revealed that a member of the Selous Scouts admitted in 1978 that they had “tried both chemical and biological warfare techniques to kill terrorists”. And the recollections of the likes of Ken Flower and Henrik Ellert regarding Selous Scouts atrocities are highly relevant because the Scouts were directly under the control of the CIO and not the Rhodesian Army. What is more, the Rhodesian government had a tight control over the media which facilitated the psy-ops motives of the Selous Scouts. The White population were thus subject to brainwashing by government propaganda which included a great deal of disinformation.

This partly explains the reluctance of many Old Rhodesians to accept this less than salubrious aspect of the fight to maintain the status quo.

*

Note to readers: please click the share buttons above or below. Forward this article to your email lists. Crosspost on your blog site, internet forums. etc.

Adeyinka Makinde is a writer based in London, England. He writes on his blog where [this article](#) was originally published.

Note

[1] A key aspect of the chemical warfare programme concerns its funding. Researchers have pinpointed Britain as the point of origin, from where the money was funnelled through Saudi Arabia and South Africa before reaching Rhodesia. The “British-betrayed-us” mantra by Old Rhodesians forgets that the “Kith and Kin” attitude remained strong until the end when the British and the government of Ian Smith realised that the financial and manpower burdens imposed by the war on the Rhodesian state, made it impossible to continue. The emigration of Whites who wanted to avoid compulsory service, sanctions, as well as the moral contradictions inherent in maintaining a racial state, made its continuation impossible.

Featured image: Emblem of the Selous Scouts Special Forces unit of the Rhodesian Security Forces. Although nominally part of the Rhodesian Army, the Scouts were directly under the control of the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) and not the Rhodesian Army. (Photo is from the author)

[**Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page**](#)

[**Become a Member of Global Research**](#)

Articles by: [Adeyinka Makinde](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca