

# LESSONS FROM THE RHODESIAN

## CONFLICT

By Tom Lodge

This article has two purposes. The first intention is to briefly trace out the major developments in the Rhodesian crisis from the break-up of the Central African Federation to the present situation. Secondly, it will be asked if any conclusions can be drawn from the conflict in Rhodesia which have a bearing on future South African developments.

The 1960's began after a decade which had been marked by considerable prosperity in Southern Rhodesia, due in part to the revenues generated from the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt, as well as piecemeal reforms in the position of urban Africans, reforms which themselves flowed from the requirements of an advancing industrial economy. Such measures included improvements in African wages and urban living conditions, the expansion of educational facilities including the foundation of a multiracial university and the removal of some bars to African advancement in civil service and industrial occupations. Black Rhodesians had also, been granted a limited participation in central political processes with the 1957 Franchise Act and the opening-up of the ruling United Federal Party to African membership. The extent of political reform willingly contemplated by a Rhodesian administration reached its limits in the 1961 constitution which established two parliamentary rolls, in practice twenty per cent of House of Assembly seats being open to African control, and which offered to African politicians the prospect of eventual majority rule though the timetable for this could be decided only by the ruling minority. The reforms did little to meet African economic or political aspirations (the latter being from 1957 channelled through a succession of mass based nationalist parties) and at the same time succeeded in eroding the UFP's support in its white constituency. Alienated in particular by the prospect of African constitutional advance and the possibility of modification and even repeal of the Land Apportionment Act (which assigned just less than half of Rhodesia's land to African occupation and use) electoral support swung to the recently formed Rhodesia Front which in 1962 managed to win a majority of seats in the House of Assembly.

The Rhodesia Front's programme was composed of promises to halt and in some cases reverse the processes of social and political reform which had begun under the aegis of Federation. The Federal structure itself was subject not only to the antagonism of the dominant white Rhodesian political party but was also bitterly opposed by ascending nationalist forces in Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland and was dissolved at the end of 1963. The Rhodesian Front administration moved swiftly to consolidate their position by increasing

the scope of restrictions on African political activity, bringing broadcasting and to a lesser extent the press into conformity with official policy and enlarging the sphere of formal segregatory measures. Negotiations for independence with the British Government foundered on the conditions laid down by the British Secretary of State, popularly known as the 'Five Principles': (1) unimpeded progress to majority rule; (2) guarantees against retrogressive constitutional changes; (3) immediate improvements in the political position of Africans; (4) progress towards the elimination of racial discrimination; (5) majority acceptance within Rhodesia of independence terms. Discussion led to deadlock, and the Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith, encouraged by the overwhelming electoral support he had received from whites in the July 1965 election as well as a referendum in November, declared Rhodesia to be independent. Initial British response was to disavow the possibility of employing force to quash the rebellion and set in motion a programme of economic sanctions which from the British point of view, were at best ineffectual, and at worst actually contributed to Rhodesian economic resilience in the first decade of UDI.

British reluctance to act decisively against the illegal regime was publicly manifest in the various sets of negotiations that progressed in the first years of UDI, as well as at a more discreet level in the extraordinary official tolerance of oil company sanction-breaking. For example, the 1966 negotiations on H M S Tiger had they been acceptable, would have left the agreed changes in African political status within the control of an 'interim government' in which the Rhodesian Front would predominate. In effect the Front would still have absolute control over such matters as release of detainees and limitations to African political activity. None of the conditions laid down by the Labour administration would have necessitated anything more than very gradual improvements in the social, economic and political status of Africans. However Ian Smith was not prepared to accept on behalf of his colleagues the prospect of any immediate constitutional modifications or any review of such matters as land allocation (provisions for which were to be altered in the 1969 Land Tenure Act to the benefit of European farmers). The talks eventually broke down over the less vital issue of the incumbent administration's 'legality'. In the 'Fearless' talks of 1968 the Smith administration continued to display its lack of real motivation to come to a settlement in the face of concessions by the British which would have granted African nationalists the shadowy prospect of

majority rule at the turn of the century. Once again the talks foundered on relatively trivial issues while domestically Ian Smith was confronted with a plaintive but feebly orchestrated chorus of criticism from that group most adversely affected by mandatory sanctions: the Rhodesian business and financial establishment. As far as the rest of the white population was concerned illegality had done little to interfere with their economic security and had reduced the seeming threat posed by the previously well organised and popular nationalist movement that had emerged in the late 1950's. After the banning of the two mainstream movements in 1964, those of their leaders who had managed to evade imprisonment had retreated to Lusaka to plan guerilla offensives which despite the deaths of some brave men in 1967 and 1968 had done little to shake Rhodesian military complacency.

The ineptitude and timidity of Labour's Rhodesian policy was to be matched and even exceeded by their Conservative successors, who undaunted by the passing of a new republican constitution which removed even the theoretical possibilities of African political advancement contained in the 1961 constitution, opened fresh negotiations with Salisbury. The subsequent Pearce Commission, which set out in 1972 to test the public acceptability of a most ludicrous set of arrangements promising neither to modify existing discriminatory legislation nor to prevent future constitutional alterations to the disadvantage of Africans, found the Anglo-Rhodesian settlement proposals were almost unanimously disliked by Africans. As African approval of any settlement was the only principle that the British had retained from its pre-UDI stand the settlement initiative was abandoned. Nevertheless the futile exercise did have two important results. First it provoked the creation of a new political organisation within the country, the African National Council, originally founded to channel African hostility to the settlement proposals. Secondly, Commonwealth and especially African antagonism to the British initiative served to give fresh impetus to the guerilla offensive with the opening of a new front in North East Rhodesia in 1972 by forces loyal to the Zimbabwe African National Union. From this point onwards the war was to become the single most powerful factor influencing the course of any future efforts towards a settlement. Future negotiations would no longer merely involve the rebel administration and the colonial power; the realities of the situation demanded the participation of African political leaders.

This became clear in 1974. The escalation of the war in the previous year had led to a crisis in already tense Zambian-Rhodesian relations and the closure of the border. A rise in military expenditure coincided with a fall in foreign exchange earnings previously derived from Zambian copper exports through Rhodesia. Conscriptation was beginning to cut into manpower resources and the war itself lessened the attractions of Rhodesia to prospective immigrants. Most crucial of all the fall of the Caetano dictatorship in Lisbon and the intention of the new army administration, in the face of military setbacks in Mozambique and Guinea Bissau, to embark on the swift decolonisation of Portugal's empire provoked South Africa into a fresh set of foreign policy initiatives in her regional hinterland. These were to include pressure on the Rhodesian administration to come to some form of settlement so as to avoid military escalation and internationalisation of the conflict which ultimately would threaten South Africa's security. The first symptom of this pressure was the release from detention camps of men who had dominated the African political scene in the early 1960's before a decade of enforced inactivity. Old political rivalries introduced a complicating factor into the affairs of

the external liberation movements which helped to bedevil the co-ordination of their military efforts from then onwards. Nevertheless, with the accession to power in Mozambique of the FRELIMO movement, itself in informal alliance with ZANU, the guerilla struggle received a tremendous boost both in terms of the facilities Mozambique could offer, including training, base camps, and access to excellent guerilla territory, and in terms of recruitment: in 1975 20 000 young blacks crossed the border into Mozambique.

Under first South African and later American pressure a new series of talks began, this time the decisive exchanges being between Rhodesian leaders and African politicians. These included the initial meeting in August 1975 above the Victoria Falls in a railway carriage between Ian Smith and Joshua Nkomo, Abel Muzorewa, Ndabaningi Sitholi and James Chikerema, some rather undignified proceedings the following year between Smith and Nkomo who at that point lacked a power base and finally the round table conference at Geneva. By this stage the Rhodesian administration was willing to concede the issue of majority rule but this would be subject to provisions in a package devised by U S Secretary of State Henry Kissinger which left many of the principle organs of state power effectively under white control. Ian Smith and his advisors insisted that the Kissinger package was non-negotiable, a position that no African leader could endorse particularly after the emergence of ZIPA, a military 'third force' which rejected the traditional Zimbabwean leadership and made it clear that the military could be brought into any settlement only on terms of its own choosing. It was this force which eventually aligned itself with a restructured Zimbabwe African National Union command led in Mozambique by Robert Mugabe. From October 1976 Mugabe was to co-ordinate ZANU's diplomatic efforts with Joshua Nkomo's ZAPU which was building its own army on Zambian territory. This alliance, which never became fully effective at the military level, was christened the Patriotic Front.

The collapse of the Geneva talks was followed by a massive expansion in military operations — as many people were to die in 1977 as a result of the war as the total number of war casualties up to that date. The regional scope of the war also considerably expanded as the Rhodesian army embarked on a series of attacks (initially tried out in 1976) on base camps and refugee centres in neighbouring territories. Encouraged by the apparent success of such efforts the Rhodesian administration opened negotiations with those internal leaders who in the various nationalist leadership reshuffles had been left without the support of a guerilla force. These included such veterans as Sithole and Chikerema as well as Bishop Muzorewa who was able to compensate for his lack of political acumen by retaining the leadership of the umbrella organisation which had emerged during the Pearce Commission, the African National Council. These men agreed to participate in a settlement which largely reflected the terms of the Kissinger proposals rejected the previous year. By March 1978 a transitional government had been established to supervise preparations for an election under the terms of a constitution which allotted to whites 28 out of 100 House of Assembly seats (giving white members of parliament an effective veto to constitutional alterations), guaranteeing a third of the cabinet posts to white politicians and removing the civil service, police, army and judiciary from political intervention. This latter clause rendered these institutions immune from 'Africanisation' measures.

In both their military and their political strategy, Smith and his colleagues were hoping that diplomatic and strategic internationalisation of the conflict would eventually provoke

United States intervention on the side of an administration which met some of the criteria of a majoritarian settlement and to prevent the accession of a Soviet-aligned movement. This proved to be a miscalculation. Despite the Patriotic Front's inability to persuade through one means or another more people to boycott the April 1979 elections than the internal settlers were to inspire or coerce to participate, it was by the second half of that year increasingly obvious that the Patriotic Front was on the ascendent in most rural areas, that the newly elected British Conservative government was less willing to assist the new administration than pre-electoral statements had hinted, and that Rhodesia no longer had the economic resources to continue to support the massive military expenditure the war required. Muzorewa's post-settlement administration could do little to meet aroused African expectations and had little prospect of being able to do so while the war lasted. As far as the internal settlers were concerned the only saving grace in an increasingly untenable situation was that the Patriotic Front was under pressure to come once again to the negotiating table from their hosts in Zambia and Mozambique, both of whom were finding the guerilla presence economically and socially disruptive. The environment was receptive for a fresh diplomatic initiative from the British. More as a result of the support the British received from African statesmen rather than any subtlety on their part they were able to arrive at a settlement formula. This while not altogether satisfactory did meet some of the demands of Patriotic Front leaders, in particular that their army units should be allowed to remain operationally intact within Rhodesia's borders, though immobilised and monitored in special centres while all parties prepared for a fresh election. The new constitution would grant to the elected government powers of appointment and dismissal over the judiciary, civil service and army, would reserve 20 per cent of House of Assembly seats for the representation of the minority (a provision which for seven years could only be altered through a unanimous vote), and a ten year guarantee on payment of civil service pensions and nationalisation compensation. The successor regime is likely to encounter two sets of problems, the one due to the difficulty political groups will have in obtaining absolute electoral majorities, the other being financial, arising from the competing demands of overgenerous pensions and compensation on the one hand and the need for massive social expenditure on the other.

Are there any lessons that can be drawn from this history that have any relevance to South Africans?

Obviously it would be facile to draw direct parallels, South Africa is a larger and considerably more complex country and the alignment and balance of forces is rather different, but nevertheless some conclusions can be made about the Rhodesian affair which have a wider significance.

It is often said that if only Smith or his predecessors had made concessions earlier they would have been able to avert considerable bloodshed and retained better long term prospects for the white minority than they have today. There is some substance to this view: the terms offered by the British in 1966 and 1968 would have involved little immediate alteration in the status quo and an extremely gradual transfer of power from white to black hands. Ultimately however, the argument is facile. There was no compelling reason for Smith or his colleagues to accept even the very limited modifications the British were demanding: the guerilla threat was totally insignificant and sanctions had no really damaging economic impact. The white electorate had already in 1962 demonstrated the extent of its

intolerance of even token reform and there was nothing to suggest it was more amenable four or six years later. Moreover, if the Rhodesians had accepted the terms on offer nothing would have been done to remedy the basic sources of conflict: gross social inequality and the unwillingness of the regime to take any measures that might serve to legitimise its authority with the black majority. In short, the behaviour of the Rhodesian Front in the 1960s negotiations reflected the perceived immediate interests of its constituency. Even if the administration had been prepared to ignore short term considerations and implement a few reforms (something very few governments ever do without considerable pressure from below) for the sake of international respectability, the structural causes of conflict would remain. For liberal South Africans the conclusion is not particularly comforting: a government which derives some of its authority from a popular constituency (albeit a racially defined one) doesn't have much freedom of manoeuvre to do more than tamper with the structure whose overall configuration suits that constituency very nicely.

The next point arising from the above narrative is less negative though hardly more reassuring. A favourite theme of Rhodesian propaganda was that the country was an enclave of western values and civilisation. Implicit in this was the belief that one day this would be recognised by the West proper which would perceive that in the Rhodesian debacle something both materially and morally precious too valuable to lose was at stake. As we have seen this kind of reasoning underlay Rhodesian illusions that America would eventually intervene to prop up the internal settlement. At its most exalted level it is difficult to see how Rhodesians could have justified such an argument: even by Western standards the way white Rhodesians treat their black fellow countrymen seems pretty uncivilised. But in a more basic sense, the argument is a variation on an assumption that is widely held even among people who have no illusions about the extent of social justice in their country: that Southern Africa is an area of vital importance to Western economic and strategic interests. Even if this was the case it does not flow from this that a revolutionary movement of the calibre of the ZANU wing of the Patriotic Front would necessarily jeopardise such interests. But leaving this question aside it is highly debatable whether Southern Africa is as important to the West as its white inhabitants believe. Weighed up against the importance of oil supplies and third world trade with the West, both of which are likely to become bargaining counters, South Africa's minerals in the long term will probably decrease in relative significance. Radicals, liberals and reactionaries in South Africa can all look forward to increased international isolation.

Another observation about the Rhodesian conflict which seems relevant to South African onlookers is that the war has had an especially dehumanising effect on its participants and the particular features of a racist settler society should lead one to expect this. Whatever the differences, both the South African and Rhodesian social formations tend to promote a communal ethnic consciousness as opposed to one, say, based on class considerations (though it can be argued that these are not incompatible with each other). There are immense disparities in wealth and these are made all the more blatantly obvious by the vulgarly ostentatious lifestyle both white minorities adopt. There are considerable differences in values between the settler and the host population in both countries and no attempt is made in either to create a common overriding culture. So when the lines of confrontation are drawn it is to be expected that no fine distinc-

tions will be drawn between official agents of authority or the insurgents and the more 'neutral' civilian population. The Rhodesian experience bears this out. Here an important share of the casualties were the so-called civilian 'collaborators' with the guerillas — that is just about anybody in rural areas who broke curfew regulations. Similarly, the guerillas perceived white farmers and their families as a perfectly valid target for attack — for without their presence in remote rural areas the Rhodesian intelligence system would have collapsed and in any case their situation was symbolic of one of the most fundamental causes of conflict: the inequitable and economically irrational distribution of land. But one should go further than this to understand the particularly atrocious quality of violence in the Rhodesian conflict. Both sides would include men in their ranks who came from the most desperately placed elements in the population: people from a culturally broken and economically distorted rural environment and recruits from an urban lumpen-proletariat brutalised by a system that denied them a humane identity. The tempo of violence and counterviolence assisted in brutalising others — one need look no further than the lyrics of certain Rhodesian pop-songs and the ghastly slang that has evolved in war-time settler society. One can expect much the same behaviour in the context of a future South African conflict. Terrorism shorn of its perorative connotations is simply a strategy: the inspiration or coercion of support for a revolutionary movement through a set of tactics which would include political assassination, symbolic acts of violence against members of an identifiable class or community, and acts of intimidation within the revolutionary movement's direct constituency to prevent treachery or collaboration with the authorities. Terrorism is sometimes carried out concurrently with a guerilla strategy (low intensity military operations co-ordinated with a programme of social reorganisation) and is sometimes rejected altogether by revolutionary movements. It is often important in revolutionary conflicts in industrial societies or in those where the scope for organisation is very limited, where the insurgents are not

operating in an environment which allows them to set up a logistical network or any kind of administration, and where the combatants are unevenly matched in terms of the manpower and technology at their disposal. As a strategy it is often very effective in undermining the power of authority but presents tremendous problems for the process of post-revolutionary social reconstruction. Perhaps for this reason revolutionary South African movements have been relatively slow in adopting elements of a terrorist strategy. But inevitably the qualitative and quantitative nature of violence will increase. Nothing in the South African government's reform programme matches even the timid concessions of the Rhodesian Federal government — and these did not go very far towards meeting rising African expectations. The final lesson is one that is perhaps a little more heartening to readers of journals like Reality. And that is there is some value in the dissemination of information and opinion at odds with the prevalent myths and assumptions of an enclave society. The Rhodesian example shows this by default. Compared even to the politically philistine and culturally trivial South African press the Rhodesian media are awful. Dissent amongst settlers in Rhodesia has rarely taken an organised form — nothing comparable to the various associations and institutions that have existed in South Africa. Ignorance about conditions elsewhere in Africa reaches incredible heights in Rhodesian settler society. All this has contributed to the air of unreality that has conditioned political decision-making in Rhodesian circles. Illusions and fear fostered by ignorance, arrogance and complacency have in one way or another been responsible for the loss of thousands of lives. Some of those lives might have been saved if doubts had been allowed a more widespread circulation. These are some of the lessons of the Rhodesian conflict. Such are the similarities between Rhodesian and South African society that it is unlikely these will be the conclusions drawn by those who have the power to influence the course of events in this country. □

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