Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the "Dark Forests" of Matabeleland

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The South African War Reappraised is part of a larger series of studies in imperialism edited by John M. MacKenzie and published by the Manchester University Press. A total of twelve authors contributed to the study; most of them are either British or South African, including one Afrikaner historian. Two of the chapters concern the role of British journalists and the press in the coverage of the war, while another deals with the nonconformist churches and clergy. Subsequent essays explore African participation in the Boer forces, Africans’ attitudes toward the British, and the views of the Cape Afrikaners (who had previously achieved a working entente with Cecil Rhodes, one-time premier of the Cape Colony) regarding the larger British empire. Two chapters treat the connection between the war and India, a labor source for Natal, as well as the linkage between the imperial authorities in London and Lord Milner, their remarkably independent-minded, subimperial representative in South Africa. One author takes a long-range view of the historiography concerning the origins of the war, while another analyzes the effect of the war on the subsequent structure and policies of imperial defense.

The editor, a member of the history faculty at Oxford Brookes University, provides the introductory and concluding chapters. The latter is an exceptionally fine piece of work, exploring the legacies and ramifications of the war on various part of the empire, the English-speaking world, and the European continent. Lowry demonstrates an impressive command of the literature in the 157 endnotes to his conclusion. The volume has a useful index but no bibliography other than the sources cited in the twelve separate chapters. In the chapter endnotes, however, the publisher is consistently omitted, and other data are missing in a few instances, indicating lapses in copyediting.

All in all, though, this is an excellent, thoughtful, well-documented, gracefully written, and innovative study which merits a place in any research library dealing with Southern Africa and on advanced undergraduate- and graduate-level syllabi. It has both reference and teaching utility for university libraries and students.

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This is an extremely complex and deeply disturbing book which cries out for comparative studies elsewhere in Africa. It is a book that establishes trains of thought that keep popping up; one continues to mull over the
many and varied aspects of violence and memory touched upon long after one has stopped reading. At first glance the subject matter of the book appears simple: the history of a geographically defined area and peoples’ memories of this area. But as with so many seemingly simple formulae, the ever-increasing complexity and permutations are awe-inspiring.

In the 1890s the Matabele kingdom of Lobengula was defeated by the mercenary forces of the British South Africa Company and their British Imperial allies. Lobengula and his soldiers were driven off the central highlands and beyond the Shangani River. In 1894 the newly victorious BSAC administration proclaimed the Shangani to be the Matabele homeland. After World War II people were evicted from their homes in the highlands and deported to the Shangani Reserve. Here the evictees had a profound impact on those already living in the dark forests of the Shangani, bringing with them ideas regarding Christianity, modernity, and nationalist opposition to the Rhodesian state. Violence and Memory deftly presents the varying responses and attitudes of the actors to these evictions and settlements. The issues of ethnicity, religion, linguistics, and beliefs about land and environment are all covered in a series of overlapping discussions in which evictees and original inhabitants continually voice their opinions. The authors then explore the development of nationalism in Lupane and Nkayi, and the breakdown of distinctions and antagonism between evictees and original inhabitants in the face of Rhodesian government practices, especially the enforcement of its agricultural policies. As one of the original inhabitants states: “We were being destocked, they were being evicted. It was the same, so we decided to join and resist again” (99).

Particularly interesting are the insights into the manner in which the Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army (Zipra), the military wing of Zimbabwe African Peoples Union (Zapu), was able to conduct its successful war. The evidence provided by Zipra commanders and combatants provides a much needed counter not only to the official Zimbabwean war history but also to the widely published Rhodesian accounts of the war. In the light of recent Truth and Reconciliation Commission findings in South Africa, the role of chemical warfare takes on special meaning. The impact of anthrax and poisons seeded by the Rhodesians on nationalist forces and the wider community in which they operated makes for troubling reading.

By far the most frightening part of the book, however, is the section dealing with the deployment of the Zimbabwean Fifth Brigade in the Lupane and Nkayi districts after independence. With chilling understatement, the authors describe the manner in which the legal representatives of a state indulged in the most barbaric and sadistic practices imaginable: forcing people to climb trees until they fell; compelling brothers to engage in boxing matches; carrying out systematic rape, savage beatings, and torture; killing people and livestock wantonly—all this and much, much more. The Fifth Brigade, which answered directly to Prime Minister Robert Mugabe, was not constrained by the normal military chain of command.
and consciously waged an ethnic war against the Matabele. Soldiers of the Fifth Brigade were secure in the knowledge that they were beyond retribution, that no matter what they did they would not be prosecuted. Reading these pages, one begins to understand how the most terrible war crimes can come to be perpetrated. As the authors observe, “Perhaps the only reasonable explanation is that the Fifth Brigade was simply acting under orders” (222).

The Unity Accords of 1987 failed to translate into material benefits for the inhabitants of the Shangani and contributed in large measure to the increasing ethnicization of politics: “The careful wording of . . . provincial council minutes hid the more popular interpretation of neglect as a product of ethnic discrimination. Ethnic interpretations in rural Matabeleland drew on memories of the Fifth Brigade’s explicitly tribal and political attacks” (235). Furthermore, the structural adjustment programs instituted by the Zimbabwean government effectively crippled the supply of services through inadequate funding. This failure, coupled with historical memories, reinforced the widely held belief that Matabeleland was being discriminated against on ethnic grounds.

At times the welter of detail can be overwhelming, but it is never boring. An example of this is the last and most interesting chapter of the book, whose topic itself warrants another full-length study. “Resolving the Legacies of War? Accountability, Commemoration and Cleansing” deals with the manner in which the memory of violence perpetrated in the past is used to deal with and give meaning to violence in the more recent period. The authors contrast the search for sites of commemoration and the war graves of Zipra soldiers by the Zapu War Shrines Committee (Mafela Trust) with the government’s desire to depersonalize, downplay, and depoliticize the contribution of Zapu and Zipra through the establishment of heroes’ acres. The contrast between the Mafela Trust commemoration at Pupu, the site of Lobengula’s last battle and a site of ritual importance to Zipra combattants in 1992, and the unveiling of an official monument to an unknown soldier near the Lupane administrative center in 1998, could not be starker. As the authors note, “Former guerrillas who were present wondered how a soldier could be unknown—they wanted to know who he was, where he was from, and they wondered what purpose a single soldier served” (262).

One of the great—and quite frankly unnerving—strengths of the book is its differentiation, on the basis of extensive oral testimony, of the various forms of violence committed and the differing moral judgments attached thereto. All in all, this book admirably fulfills the aim of the authors themselves, to tell “the story of people who want to be incorporated into nationalist history, who want their contribution recognised, and who feel that the nationalist goals they fought and suffered for were not only valuable in themselves, but remain one of the principal means through which they can hold the state to account” (7).
This book will be of interest to anybody with even a smattering of interest in Zimbabwean and southern African history, and should be compulsory reading for anybody wishing to begin or end an insurgency war. Finally, in the light of current developments, there is ample scope, but I fear very little opportunity, for similar work to be conducted in the Kavango and Caprivi regions of northern Namibia.

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This book surveys the conduct of warfare in the coastward areas of West and West Central Africa prior to the nineteenth century. The logic of this choice of “Atlantic Africa” as the unit of study is perhaps debatable. Although the various African societies within this region in this period were all to a greater or lesser degree subject, in their conduct of warfare as in other respects, to the influence of Europe (including the introduction of firearms) and in particular to the impact of the Atlantic slave trade, Thornton’s own interpretation plays down the significance of these factors. Consequently he struggles to identify common themes, concluding explicitly that “general principles may be possible but at present they elude us” (150). Atlantic Africa is in effect defined by the military source material available; it is Africa as known through contemporary European sources, with local Arabic sources in translation also invoked for Islamic societies in the West African interior.

In practice, Atlantic Africa is not treated as a single region. Thornton approaches his topic through a series of chapters, each dealing with a particular subregion: the West African savannah; the riverine area of Senegambia and Sierra Leone; the forest area of the Gold Coast; the intermediate (between savannah and forest) area of the Bight of Benin (with some reference also to the Bight of Biafra); and the savannah of West Central Africa. In the final chapter he digresses into the fascinating, but in this context tangential, subject (familiar from his other publications) of the possible influence of African patterns of military organization and practice in rebellions by African-born slaves in the Americas. The diverse modes of warfare in these different regions are described through the framework of a varying mix of cavalry, infantry, and aquatic (canoe) fighting. The analysis is solid and illuminating on questions of armament, tactics, and organization, but generally slighter on the relationship between warfare and the wider society—the connections, for example, between military service and concepts of citizenship, or social differentiation and political structure; and there is not much on the broader purposes, as opposed to the techni-