

Poison in the Rhodesian Bush War

How Guerrillas Gain Legitimacy

C. Wittenberg

S:1215140

Klikspaanweg 17, 2324LW, Leiden

Tel: 06-16338333

Mail: Colmwittenberg@gmail.com

Master Thesis Research Master African Studies

15 ects

Prof. Dr. J.B. Gewalt

Dr. S. Bellucci

09-07-2018

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	2
List of Terms and Abbreviations	3
Introduction	4
Chapter One: The CBW Program	
The Beginning of the Program	9
The Production of Poison	11
The Dissemination of Poison	12
Death	14
The Wedge	15
Success	17
Chapter Two: Guerrillas, Mhondoro and Civilians	
Power Vacuums	18
Guerrillas	19
Mediums	20
Mujiba	22
Taboos	22
The Situation	23
Chapter Three: Poison, Witchcraft and Growing Legitimacy	
Poison and Witchcraft	24
Guerrillas and Witches	26
Conclusion	28
Bibliography	32

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the following people
without whom I would not have been able to write this thesis:

Margot Pauëlsen
Wilma Vermeulen
Dick Wittenberg
Marek Wittenberg
Esther Wittenberg
Sam Möring
Thom van Mulligen
Dennis van der Pligt
Lesley de Keijzer
Elfi Beijering
Alette Blom
Willem Baetsen
Jorn Bunk
Ayla Turan
Loes Oudenhuisen
Marnix de Bruyne
Bram Vermeulen
Ørjan Larsen
Pauline Bax
Chris Kilala
Hector Mugani
Eleni Mugani
Gogo
Family Brickhill

List of Terms and Abbreviations

CBW	Chemical and Biological Warfare
Chimurenga	War of Liberation (Shona)
Chipotswa, chitsinga	Variations of rheumatic diseases (Shona)
COMOPS	Combined Operations
FRELIMO	Frente de Libertação de Moçambique
Uroyi	Evil power of witchcraft (Shona)
Mhondoro	Ancestral spirits of chiefs (Shona)
Muboora	Pumpkin leaves (Shona)
Mujiba	Young insurgent support (Shona)
Muroyi	Witch (Shona)
RSF	Rhodesian Security Forces
Rudzi	Type (Shona)
SB	Special Branch
ZANU	Zimbabwe African National Union
ZANLA	Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army
ZAPU	Zimbabwe African People's Union
ZIPRA	Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army

Introduction

It was 1975 and the Rhodesian Bush War (1965-1980) entered its final stage. The Rhodesian government and its Security Forces had successfully kept the African nationalists at bay for a decade but now found themselves on the losing side. In a final attempt to combat the flood of guerrillas entering the country, the Rhodesians allegedly turned to chemical and biological weapons (CBWs). Rumours circulated about a secret program within the Rhodesian army which produced, experimented with, and disseminated poisons. Suspicions arose that water sources were contaminated, doctored clothes and food were entered in the guerrillas' supply lines and that the anthrax outbreak of 1978 was no accident.

Up till 1987 these rumours and suspicions were never substantiated. That changed with the posthumous autobiography of Ken Flower, head of Rhodesia's Central Intelligence Organization (CIO). In his book *Serving Secretly* he very briefly describes how would-be guerrilla recruits were supplied with poisoned uniforms. "The men would be sent on their way to the guerrilla training camps, but before reaching their destination would die a slow death in the African bush."¹ It was the first time that a Rhodesian state official, an insider, admitted that at least one of the suspicions was true. Flower's autobiography incited more research on the topic of Rhodesian poison.

Former CIO official Henrik Ellert was the first to write about the inner workings of the CBW program. In his 1989 book *The Rhodesian Front War* he shows the connection between a Rhodesian special forces unit, called the Selous Scouts, and poison. The production of poisoned clothes took place in their facilities. The humans on which these goods were tested were disposed of by Selous Scouts and they also played an important role in the dissemination of doctored goods and bacteriological cultures.²

In her 1992 article *Anthrax Epizootic in Zimbabwe* American doctor Meryl Nass for the first time scientifically demonstrates how the anthrax outbreak of 1978 could have been manmade. She shows how it had distinct differences from regular outbreaks. An unprecedented number of infected humans, the unnatural way the disease spread over the country and the perfect timing for the regime are all suspicious. She ends her investigation however without solid conclusions and instead calls for more research on the topic.³

While Flower, Ellert and Nass wrote about the Rhodesian regime and the intricacies of its poison program, historians Jocelyn Alexander, JoAnn McGregor and Terence Ranger focussed more on the consequences of poison for the guerrillas and the rural population. For their 2000 book *Violence and Memory* they interviewed guerrilla commanders and local leaders. It became clear that the fear of poison was ingrained in rural societies and amongst guerrilla groups. With people and cattle dying under strange circumstances all over Rhodesia, paranoia grew and conspiracy theories circulated. Many people held the Rhodesian government ultimately responsible.⁴

¹ Ken Flower, *Serving Secretly: An Intelligence Chief on Record, Rhodesia Into Zimbabwe 1964-1981*, (London 1987), p. 137.

² H. Ellert, *The Rhodesian Front War, Counter-Insurgency and Guerrilla Warfare 1962-1980*, p. 109-114.

³ Meryl Nass, "Anthrax Epizootic in Zimbabwe, 1978-1980: Due to Deliberate Spread?", *Physicians for Social Responsibility Quarterly* 2,(1992), p. 198-209.

⁴ Jocelyn Alexander, JoAnn McGregor and Terence Ranger, *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the 'Dark Forests' of Matabeleland*, (Oxford 2000), p. 144-150.

Historian Luise White builds on the work of Alexander, McGregor and Ranger in her 2004 article *How Guerrillas Die in War*. She argues that the CBW program was not only meant to kill guerrillas but deliberately tried to instil fear and feed paranoia. She especially focuses on the connection between poison and witchcraft and the impact this connection had on the rural perception of the war. Rhodesian poison should not only be seen as a practical, military tool but also as a symbolic, supernatural force.⁵

The most recent publication on Rhodesian poison is Glenn Cross's 2017 book *Dirty War*. He summarizes the accumulated work of his predecessors neatly and adds to it a number of interviews with Chief-Superintendent of the CBW program Michael McGuinness. These interviews mainly provide more detail on the organization, production processes and dissemination methods of the program. Based on this new information Cross is able to estimate how effective the Rhodesian poison was. Although the CBW program could not tip the scales in favour of the regime, he argues that it was very successful.⁶

In contrast to White, Cross maintains the program's primary goal was not to sow dissent or instil witchcraft related fear but simply to kill as many guerrillas as possible, which it did. After the war, friend and foe admitted that the use of poison had been a very effective weapon. Flower called it "*diabolically successful*" and Nicholas Nkomo, a commander in the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), claimed the dissemination of chemical- and biological weapons was the most effective strategy deployed against his troops.⁷

Aside from the killing, Cross acknowledges that the dissemination of CBWs had more consequences. Poison was used as an aid to the Rhodesian Security Forces. It forced guerrillas out of areas where the army was weak into areas where its presence was stronger. By poisoning water sources at and across the borders with Zambia and Mozambique the program forced guerrillas to carry more water and less ammunition when infiltrating the country. Most importantly Rhodesia's poison operations changed the relationship between guerrillas and the Zimbabwean rural population.

Guerrillas relied heavily on the collaboration with rural supporters. They provided them with food, equipment, shelter and information. The CBW program used this collaboration to disseminate its poisons. So called contact men and women, local Zimbabweans, were paid to supply guerrillas with doctored goods. If such an operation succeeded, the survivors would retaliate against the rural population. In the early stages of the program this caused great distrust between civilians and guerrillas.⁸

The general picture of the Rhodesian CBW effort, most recently and extensively painted by Cross, is one of success. The program succeeded in its primary goal, killing a lot of guerrillas. It allowed the RSF to force guerrillas into certain areas and limit their water supply. And a side-effect was that it disrupted the important relationship between guerrillas and civilians. Many scholars and people involved concluded that the program had been a very successful military tool.⁹

⁵ Luise White, "Poisoned Food, Poisoned Uniforms, and Anthrax: Or, How Guerrillas Die in War", *Osiris*, 2nd Series, Vol. 19, Landscapes of Exposure: Knowledge and Illness in Modern Environments (2004), p. 220-233, p. 224,225.

⁶ Glenn Cross, *Dirty War, Rhodesia and Chemical Biological Warfare 1975-1980*, (Solihull 2017), p. 40.

⁷ Alexander, McGregor and Ranger, *Violence and Memory*, p. 144; Jeremy Brickhill, "Zimbabwe's Poisoned Legacy: Secret War in Southern Africa", *Covert Action Quarterly* 43 (Winter 1992-1993), p. 9; Flower, *Serving Secretly*, p. 137; Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 40.

⁸ Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 113-116.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 40.

That conclusion is however incomplete. Although the CBW program indeed achieved the aforementioned effects, another consequence of poison in Rhodesia went overlooked. Scholars and people involved maintain that the program's social impact was limited to the disrupting of guerrilla-civilian collaborations. They fail to mention that guerrilla commanders nipped this disrupting effect in the bud as soon as it occurred and, more importantly, were able to use the poison program to their advantage. The program may have weakened the relationship between guerrillas and rural population in the short run but definitely strengthened it in the long run. By taking a closer look at the long term social impact of the Rhodesian CBW effort the incomplete image of a successful poison program can be rectified. In order to give a more complete and nuanced assessment of its effectiveness, it is crucial to look at the role poison played in rural communities.¹⁰

As White shows, poison was more than just a means to kill. It was a form of witchcraft, a field of study already written about extensively. In his 1967 book *The African Witch* anthropologist Michael Gelfand explores the common cosmological beliefs of Zimbabwean rural communities. He explains how poison, medicine and witchcraft are closely related to each other because they are derived from the same supernatural source of power. A spirit medium uses this power for the benefit of the community; a witch uses it to undermine the community.¹¹

Historian David Lan builds on the work of Gelfand in his 1985 book *Guns and Rain* in which he shows how spirit mediums and witches played important roles in the Rhodesian Bush War. Spirit mediums helped the guerrilla war effort in all kinds of ways. They provided them with knowledge of the area and new recruits, access to hiding places and holy shrines, and above all they gave guerrillas a certain degree of legitimacy over the land they tried to liberate. Witches on the other hand were held responsible for the people's misfortune and dire situation. They thrived in these war-time conditions and were thought to be empowered by the Rhodesian government. Guerrillas weren't merely fighting the Rhodesian Security Forces, they were fighting witchcraft. It is therefore not strange that the legitimacy sought by guerrillas and given to them by spirit mediums was heavily based on the guerrillas' ability to hunt witches.¹²

It was in this context of spirit mediums, witch-hunting and legitimacy that the Rhodesian CBW program disseminated its doctored goods. By connecting the work of Alexander, McGregor, Ranger, White, Gelfand and Lan on the relationship between guerrillas and civilians to the work of Flower, Ellert, Nass and Cross on the Rhodesian CBW effort finally the question can be answered: How did the Rhodesian chemical- and biological warfare program influence the Rhodesian Bush War?

In order to answer that question this thesis employs the use of secondary sources produced by the aforementioned writers and many others. Written primary sources are unfortunately very hard to come by since the program used a read and destroy policy and spirit mediums and guerrillas didn't keep notes during the war. After 1980 a plethora of memoirs and military histories were published, mainly authored by former members of the Rhodesian Security Forces. Although these books provide some insight in their modus operandi, the topic of poison is skilfully avoided.

¹⁰ Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 116-120.

¹¹ Michael Gelfand, *The African Witch*, (London 1967) p. 17-25; White, "Poisoned Food, Poisoned Uniforms, and Anthrax", p. 222, 223.

¹² David Lan, *Guns and Rain, Guerrillas & spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe*, (London 1985), p. 120- 134.

In pursuit of first-hand accounts I multiple times found myself sitting opposite former Selous Scouts. They proudly spoke about their service and the daring operations they executed but gave evasive answers as soon as poison entered the conversation. Some of them admitted they worked in Selous Scouts facilities at the time of the CBW effort, but said they knew nothing. Others entertained the possibility that such a program had existed but said they weren't aware of any details and certainly weren't involved in any of those practices themselves. Speaking to them wasn't fruitful. As historian Jeremy Brickhill wrote in his 1992 article *Zimbabwe's Poisoned Legacy*: "A deadly code of silence binds these practitioners of the sinister arts of war".¹³

Former guerrillas also have remained remarkably silent about the rumours that poison was used against them. Some memoirs and personal histories have surfaced but none of them touch on that topic. One would think that after independence the new state of Zimbabwe would do everything to investigate allegations of CBW practices during the war but that hasn't been the case. It is well documented that the two African nationalist movements, Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), at times fought each other as vigorously as they fought the Rhodesians. Luise White puts forward the theory that one guerrilla army might have used anthrax on the other guerrilla army and that the new government would rather bury that dirty episode than investigate it. Guerrilla accounts on the use of poison are therefore mostly confined to the interviews conducted by Alexander, McGregor, Ranger and Mafuranhuzi Gumbo who in his 1995 book *Guerrilla Snuff* gives an insight in the life of a guerrilla recruit.¹⁴

Archival documents from ZANU and ZAPU don't provide many answers either. According to their statistics only 69 guerrillas died because of poison during the entire war and no details on these cases are mentioned. Documents and interviews from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) do give some insight in the CBW program though. The South Africans worked together closely with the Rhodesians. They assisted in avoiding international sanctions and sent troops, equipment and money to keep the black nationalists at bay. The South African army and intelligence community were aware of the Rhodesian poison program. They smuggled funds and possibly even bacteriological cultures into the country. After the war South Africa reaped the benefits of this collaboration. Project Coast, the poison program in service of the Apartheid regime, often used poisons and methods developed in the Rhodesian Bush War. In a TRC interview Wouter Basson, the leader of Project Coast, describes how he acquired that information from former Selous Scouts and former CIO officials who migrated to South Africa after 1980.¹⁵

Apart from the TRC's inquiries and the interviews conducted by Alexander, McGregor, Ranger and Gumbo there's not much primary source material available. Nevertheless it is possible to make an assessment of the CBW program's impact on the war. In order to do that, the first chapter focuses on the CBW program itself. It explains how the program started, how it was organized and who were responsible. It also pays close attention to the modus operandi of the program by looking at which dissemination techniques were used for which poisons. The chapter eventually deals with the generally known effects of the poison program. How the program killed guerrillas, how they were forced into certain areas and how their relationship with the rural population was disrupted, will all be discussed.

To fully understand how the CBW program influenced the relationship between guerrillas and rural population, it is essential to first understand that relationship. The second chapter deals with precisely that. It discusses the rise of two groups, *Mujiba*, youngsters assisting the guerrillas, and

¹³ Brickhill, "Zimbabwe's Poisoned Legacy", p. 4.

¹⁴ Mafuranhuzi Gumbo, *Guerrilla Snuff*, (Harare 1995), p. 23.

¹⁵ Brian Rappert, Chandré Gould, *Dis-Eases of Secrecy, Tracing History, Memory & Justice*, (Auckland Park 2017), p. 54-56; "The State Outside South-Africa between 1960 and 1990", *Truth and Reconciliation Final Report*, vol. 2, chapter 2, paragraph 165,

spirit mediums. *Mujiba* and mediums became increasingly important in rural society during the war. For a variety of reasons both groups entered in a mutually beneficial collaboration with the guerrillas. What the motives were of the ones involved and how these relationships worked, is discussed in this chapter.

The third and final chapter deals with the role of poison in these relationships. First it explains how and why poison and witchcraft are connected. Secondly it discusses how combating witchcraft is the responsibility of certain ancestral spirits, which are called *Mhondoro*. *Mhondoro* have this responsibility because they are the spirits of former chiefs, rulers of the land. Thirdly it is explained how guerrillas, by fighting poison, could become witch-hunters in service of *Mhondoro*. This increased their legitimacy among Rhodesia's rural population.

Poison and the guerrillas' search for legitimacy are unmistakably connected to each other. This connection can be analyzed by combining the existing literature on the poison program with the literature on witchcraft and Zimbabwean cosmological beliefs. By doing so it is now possible to give a more complete assessment of the program's impact on the war.

Chapter One: The CBW Program

The Beginning of the Program

In the last phase of the war, between 1975 and 1980, the Rhodesians searched for alternative strategies to combat the flood of African nationalists. The Protected Villages had the goal to separate civilians from guerrillas, Operation Turkey was meant to render civilians incapable of supplying guerrillas due to food shortages and then there was a third plan, the Rhodesian Chemical and Biological Warfare (CBW) program.¹⁶

The main purpose of the program was to kill guerrillas. This goal was achieved in multiple ways. Doctored goods were entered into their supply lines, hitting guerrillas already present in Rhodesia. Water sources along infiltration routes were poisoned, hitting combatants entering the country. Poisoned food, drinks, medicines and clothes were smuggled directly into guerrilla safe havens in Mozambique and Zambia. The program was considered diabolically successful by both African nationalists and the Rhodesian authorities.¹⁷

The CBW effort reportedly began with anatomy professor at the University of Rhodesia, Robert Symington. Around 1975, he used his contacts within the RSF to propose his plans for a poison strategy to Defence Minister P.K. van der Byl, who reported it to Prime Minister Smith. He delegated it to the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO), led by Ken Flower. When the program started exactly, is unclear. Probably the first experiments with poison were held in 1976 and it is quite certain that later that year the first operations began.¹⁸

The program was created and operational during a period of extreme rivalry within the RSF. Overarching bureaucratic control was deteriorating and caused organizations within the Rhodesian police and army to fend for themselves. Many of them were divided on strategy choice, resource allocation and intelligence sharing. Mainly the CIO and BSAP kept information from one another out of distrust and subsequently were often in each other's way. As a result of this tense climate personal and informal networks became increasingly important. That Symington's relationship with Defence Minister Van der Byl led to the creation of a CBW program, was part of that development.¹⁹

The program officially was brought under the control of Special Branch (SB) and Special Branch Chief Superintendent Mac McGuinness. SB was responsible for internal security and worked closely with the CIO but their recruits and funds came from the BSAP. SB and therefore the CBW program in effect had two masters. Failing bureaucratic control and rivalry allowed McGuinness to play both organizations; working with the BSAP on one operation and with the CIO on the next, while receiving money from both. The vague construction meant there was a lack of oversight and accountability.²⁰

¹⁶ Moorcraft, McLaughlin, *The Rhodesian War*, p. 106; Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts*, p. 89, 156.

¹⁷ Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 72-74; Flower, *Serving Secretly*, p.137; Moorcraft, McLaughlin, *The Rhodesian War*, p. 106; Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts*, p. 157

¹⁸ Martinez, "The History of the Use of Bacteriological and Chemical Agents", *Third World Quarterly*, p. 1162; B. Coen, E. Nadler, *Dead Silence, Fear and Terror on the Anthrax Trail*, (Berkeley 2009), p. 146; Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 72-74; Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts*, p. 157; Stiff, *See You in November*, p. 307-311.

¹⁹ Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 60, 61, 62; Tom Mangold, Jeff Goldberg, *Plague Wars, The Terrifying Reality of Biological Warfare*, (New York 1999), p. 226.

²⁰ Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts*, p. 160; Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 62, 63, 85-87; Mangold, Goldberg, *Plague Wars*, p. 222.

This doesn't mean however that the program was a rogue element within the RSF. It was authorized at the highest levels of Rhodesian government. Senior politicians were aware of the program's existence. The Combined Operations (COMOPS), the organization that was responsible for coordinating the entirety of the Rhodesian war effort was briefed regularly as were CIO and SB. Although McGuinness allegedly kept a lot of information about the CBW operations close to his chest, the Rhodesian leadership was well aware of the program and its purpose.²¹

It is unknown how the CBW effort was funded exactly. No hard records exist of its financial administration. Most information is based on anecdotal evidence. South African intelligence reportedly funnelled roughly 1 million US dollars a month to McGuinness and his operation of which the CIO diverted 250,000 USD for other uses. One source even claims the Saudi government was behind the money, although no reasonable motive has been provided. The money was used to buy supplies, acquire intelligence, and pay the CBW team's salaries.²²

The team at the core of the CBW effort was quite small. It consisted of Symington, as scientific head, and a number of former medical and veterinary students from University of Rhodesia. Symington had carte blanche to select them personally. One of them was Victor Noble, who became Symington's personal laboratory assistant. He and a former student, St Claire Hayes, were the main producers of the poisoned materials. Because the armed forces were short on men, the scientists were often helped by their wives.²³

The program had at least three facilities at its disposal. Symington's Borrowdale house had an SB funded laboratory next to it. The Selous Scouts fort at Bindura was used for production and storage. Bindura was too big however for the more sensitive aspects of the poison program. These could be found at the smaller Selous Scouts fort at Mount Darwin. Mount Darwin was remote and the camp sealed off from the outside world. It had five meter high iron walls with no windows. These characteristics made it the perfect scene for experimentation on humans.²⁴

Testing poisons on humans is virtually unavoidable when running a state-sponsored CBW program. It is necessary to determine the lethal dose and to know how efficiently the poisonous substances enter the body. The scale on which this kind of experimentation took place in Rhodesia is however unknown. In 2004 roughly 5000 bodies were found in an abandoned mineshaft near Mount Darwin. Zimbabwean authorities claim that many of the dead were poisoned during the war. It unfortunately remains hard to tell under which circumstances these people died exactly and other evidence is again anecdotal at best. It could be that the relatively small program relied more on trial and error in the field than actual experimentation. But it is also possible that hundreds of captured guerrillas were used as guinea pigs.²⁵

²¹ Brickhill, "Zimbabwe's Poisoned Legacy", p. 9; Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 88, 89; Mangold, Goldberg, *Plague Wars*, p. 222.

²² Martinez, "The History of the Use of Bacteriological and Chemical Agents", *Third World Quarterly*, p. 1165; Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 95, 100, 101.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 94.

²⁴ Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts*, p. 157-159; Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 79, 80, 90, 91; Balaam, *Bush War Operator*, p. 56, 57.

²⁵ Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 101, 102; Ellert, *The Rhodesian Front War*, p. 110, 111; Sachikonye, *When a State Turns on its Citizens*, p. 8; Mangold, Goldberg, *Plague Wars*, p. 223.

The Production of Poison

The program produced a variety of different poisons. Most of them could be made from basic chemicals used in Rhodesian agriculture. Warfarin and Thallium, both used to poison food, were normally rodenticides and parathion, used to poison clothing, could be found in pesticides. The program didn't itself produce any chemicals and merely adapted existing substances for a military purpose. The level of scientific sophistication was low but the small, rudimentary team did sometimes succeed in increasing the lethality of their poisons. They discovered for example that adding dimethylsulfoxide to parathion increased the amount of parathion absorbed by the body, allegedly making the poisoned clothes more deadly.²⁶

It remains uncertain where the program got its supplies from. Multiple sources suggest South-Africa supplied the needed chemicals and that a Selous Scouts courier was responsible for transportation. This seems unnecessarily complicated however since, as mentioned before, the important chemicals were available in Rhodesia itself. The goods that were to be poisoned, food, clothes, drinks, were bought from Greek Cypriot Maki Christou. Christou was owner of Madziwa Trading, a chain of general stores with its headquarters in Bindura.²⁷

The production rate of poisoned goods was dependent on the availability of supplies. It therefore heavily fluctuated. In periods of abundance, such as November 1977, the CBW team produced more than 365 pieces of poisoned clothes and 85 cans of poisoned tinned meat in two weeks. Contaminated cigarettes, medicines, cookies, toothpaste and more were also produced during this period, but in much smaller quantities. In periods of scarcity, caused by international sanctions, the production stopped completely.²⁸

The equipment and methods used to fabricate the poisoned materials were quite primitive. Roughly once every month a 25-gallon drum of "foul smelling liquid", parathion, would be delivered to Bindura Fort. Methanol was added to the drums and clothes dipped into the solution. The clothes were then dried in the sun. This technique didn't produce odourless clothes however and a new method was used. The parathion was first poured on flat tin sheets to dry in the sun. The remaining flakes were turned into a fine and odourless powder. The powder was brushed onto clothes and injected into tins of food. At the end of the war, an estimated 5000 contaminated items were made.²⁹

The CBW program did not only produce chemical poisons but also used biological weapons such as cholera, botulinum and maybe even anthrax. Apart from some reports about the production of the botulinum toxin, there is no information about how and where these bacteria were cultivated. The CBW's production of biological weapons probably started early 1979 after Noble and Jan Coetzee, head of South-African company SA Elektroniks, Meganies, Landbouen Chemies, smuggled samples of botulinum and anthrax from South-Africa to Rhodesia. Cholera was at that point already being used for some time by the Rhodesian Security Forces. Rhodesian and Portuguese troops had deployed cholera in Mozambican water sources since 1973. Anthrax and botulinum were reportedly only considered for use in assassinations, not for mass dissemination.³⁰

²⁶ Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts*, p. 156, 157, 159; Cross, *Dirty War*, p. xxviii, 103, 104; Moorcraft, McLaughlin, *The Rhodesian War*, p. 106.

²⁷ Ellert, *The Rhodesian Front War*, p. 109, 110; Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 99, 100.

²⁸ Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 105; Moorcraft, McLaughlin, *The Rhodesian War*, p. 106; Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts*, p. 159.

²⁹ Stiff, *See You in November*, p. 305; Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 103-106.

³⁰ Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 111; Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts*, p. 89, 90, 159; Mangold, Goldberg, *Plague Wars*, p. 218.

The Dissemination of Poison

In order to successfully disseminate the different poisons produced by the program, reliable military intelligence was needed. The Ground Coverage networks the Rhodesians had relied on in the first phase of the war were partially dismantled during the second phase. A new set of eyes and ears was needed. Early 1974 the Selous Scouts, a military reconnaissance unit, was founded to fill the vacuum. The Scouts executed small investigative operations, meant to sniff out guerrilla groups. When successful the regular army would sweep in with helicopters to exterminate the threat. “Fireforce”, as this tactic was called, was very effective and made the RSF much more efficient than before.³¹

Since Fireforce depended heavily on the quality and quantity of provided intelligence, the Scouts constantly tried to innovate. This led to the hugely successful pseudo operations, a type of operation first utilized by the Rhodesian Special Air Service in the Malayan Emergency and later deployed against the Kenyan Mau Mau Uprising. Small teams of black and white Scouts were trained and equipped to look just like guerrillas. They would infiltrate strategic areas of Rhodesia, live in the bush and pose as guerrilla groups to the surrounding villages. That way the Rhodesians could tap into the guerrilla version of Ground Coverage, the *Mujiba* networks. *Mujiba* were young Zimbabweans eager to help ZANLA and ZIPRA combatants by supplying food, hiding places and information. The pseudo groups, being mistaken for the real deal, would happily accept the food, use the hiding places and, above all, transmit the information to the RSF.³²

The CBW effort also benefitted from the pseudo ops. Although the Selous Scouts themselves only sparsely disseminated poisoned goods themselves, their intelligence enabled the program to arrange operations against small guerrilla camps inside Rhodesia. The practical use of the Scouts went even further. The pseudo groups sometimes managed to sow distrust between real guerrillas and Rhodesian villagers. This made it easier for the CBW program to find rural Zimbabweans who were willing to distribute poisons. Because the guerrillas were so dependent on local help, it was relatively easy for civilians to supply them with doctored goods.³³

The CBW effort often used civilians for their distribution. Contact men, as they were called, were part of the *Mujiba* networks but secretly worked for the Rhodesians. Guerrillas would give them lists of the supplies they required and the contact men handed these lists to a Provincial Special Branch Officer. If he would approve of the plan, the Special Branch team at Bindura Fort would gather the required supplies, poison them and provide them to the contact in the field. The contact men would bring the supplies to the guerrillas or leave them in a secret place for them to pick up later. Contacts were expected to bring back unused or refused goods and to report how the operation went.³⁴

³¹ Cilliers, *Counter-Insurgency in Rhodesia*, p. 120-123; Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 52; Moorcraft, McLaughlin, *The Rhodesian War*, p. 52.

³² Jonathan Pittaway, *Selous Scouts, The Men Speak*, (Avondale 2017), p. 15; Mutanda, *The Rhodesian Air Force in Zimbabwe's War of Liberation*, p. 26; Moorcraft, McLaughlin, *The Rhodesian War*, p. 52, 53; Ellert, *The Rhodesian Front War*, p. 93-95; Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts*, p. 27, 28 Cilliers, *Counter-Insurgency in Rhodesia*, p. 124-126; Balaam, *Bush War Operator*, p. 121, 122; Mangold, Goldberg, *Plague Wars*, p. 216.

³³ Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 115; Moorcraft, McLaughlin, *The Rhodesian War*, p. 52, 53; Ellert, *The Rhodesian Front War*, p. 109; Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts*, p. 159, 160; Mangold, Goldberg, *Plague Wars*, p. 216.

³⁴ Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 84, 113, 114.

Working for the Rhodesian Security Forces as contact man was a dangerous but also very lucrative business. Per guerrilla death the contact would receive a kill bonus of 1000 Rhodesian Dollars. What counted as a death by poison and how high the subsequent death bonus should be, was determined by McGuinness. Taking into account the contact man's claim, the amount of poisoned goods provided by the CBW team and the number of reported guerrilla deaths in the region, he made an assessment of the situation. It is however impossible to say how accurate his assessments were. In some instances McGuinness even believed that someone from Special Branch was tampering with numbers to inflate the effectiveness of the CBW program.³⁵

The collaboration with contact men was a smart move by the RSF. It was relatively cheap and didn't risk the lives of their precious soldiers. In the no-go areas however this method didn't work since civilians were not allowed to be there. The absence of the rural population opened up other opportunities though. Water sources were contaminated with cholera and abandoned stores were filled with doctored goods. Because there was no one to provide the guerrillas with supplies, they were forced to raid the stores.³⁶

Other stores, which were not abandoned, were also used to disseminate poisoned materials. This happened especially in the Tribal Trust Lands with shops thought to become guerrilla targets in the near future. In most cases shop owners were not made aware of the exact role they played in this scheme. They were told to put the goods on high shelves out of the reach of normal customers and were forbidden to sell them. If a guerrilla group would raid such a store, they would take the goods, wear the clothes and die in a matter of days. In some cases, shop owners worked directly for the Rhodesians as contact men and used their profession to provide local intelligence to the RSF and poisoned goods to guerrilla groups.³⁷

Using stores to disseminate doctored goods coincided neatly with Operation Turkey. The goal of Turkey, as discussed before, was to limit the food surplus in hands of the rural African population so they could not support guerrillas by supplying them. Although generally Turkey was not implemented as strictly as the Rhodesians would have wished, it still was effective in thinly populated areas. The scarcity of supporters and available supplies forced the guerrillas to rely increasingly on stores for their food, beverages, clothes and equipment.³⁸

The CBW effort also tried to hit guerrillas in their Zambian and Mozambican safe havens. Traces of their success can be found in the reports of Operation Dingo. On 23 December 1977 the RSF raided Chimoio Camp, one of ZANLA's Mozambican headquarters. Disguised as FRELIMO troops, driving FRELIMO vehicles, roughly 150 Rhodesian soldiers entered the camp. When this Trojan horse was inside, fire was opened on the unaware guerrillas, killing an estimated 3000 people. For ZANLA, maintaining the camp was mostly inhabited by civilians, the Chimoio attack was the biggest atrocity of the entire war. For the RSF it was the biggest victory. Either way, in the shade of this attack the CBW program executed its own operation. Rhodesian soldiers who were wounded during Dingo were advised not to take any medicines or food from the camp since they were poisoned. And before the troops retreated from Chimoio, more poisoned medical supplies were left behind. This was done often after external operations.³⁹

³⁵ Moorcraft, McLaughlin, *The Rhodesian War*, p. 53; Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 114; Ellert, *The Rhodesian Front War*, p. 111.

³⁶ Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts*, p. 89, 90; Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 83; Mangold, Goldberg, *Plague Wars*, p. 218.

³⁷ Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 103-104, 114, 115.

³⁸ Ellert, *The Rhodesian Front War*, p.111, 112; Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 83.

³⁹ Tekere, Mandaza ed., *A Lifetime of Struggle*, p. 85, 86; Moorcraft, McLaughlin, *The Rhodesian War*, p. 44; Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 74, 84; Cilliers, *Counter-Insurgency in Rhodesia*, p. 178; Chris Cocks, *Fireforce, One Man's War in the Rhodesian Light Infantry*, (Johannesburg 2006), p. 143-146; Gumbo, *Guerrilla Snuff*, p. 23.

Regular troops were somewhat kept in the dark about the CBW program. The majority of RLI men involved in Dingo were unaware of the doctored goods left behind in the camp. The average Rhodesian soldier in general didn't know about the production and distribution of poisoned food, clothes and more. The same can't be said of using cholera to contaminate water sources. Since 1973 units from the RLI, the Selous Scouts and Special Branch all have been involved in using cholera. Maps were maintained in order to keep track of contaminated areas. Troops were warned not to drink any water from sources in no-go zones. Cholera was especially effective in Mozambique's southern Gaza Province because the dry climate and the poisoned sources forced guerrillas to carry less ammunition and more water.⁴⁰

Death

Guerrillas who came into contact with clothing had six to twelve hours before the parathion would cause the first symptoms. Confusion, breathing difficulties, a lack of control over muscles and the subsequent loss of urine and diarrhoea could all arise. A few hours after the symptoms started, the victim would die. Poisoned guerrillas often tried to reach a spiritual healer or hospital in time. Hospitals in the Salisbury and Bindura area saw a threefold increase of reported parathion poisoning cases. Almost all of them involved young men and poisoned clothing.⁴¹

Thallium, used to contaminate food and beverages, was odourless, tasteless and colourless and could cause an enormous variety of symptoms. Before the war it had been used to eradicate baboons, so there was definitely expertise in Rhodesia on how the substance could be used to kill. Knowledge on how to treat it on the other hand, was absent. For these reasons it was very hard for spirit healers and hospitals to help victims of thallium poisoning. The stark rise in "unknown cases" reported by rural hospitals was therefore often ascribed to the accidental consumption of poisoned food.⁴²

Warfarin was also used in food but on a smaller scale. From 1978 onwards a total of 35 ZANLA guerrillas entered a Mozambican hospital in Beira. All of them had nosebleeds. Fifteen of them haemorrhaged to death. A similar type of haemorrhage struck 200 guerrillas from a ZANLA camp in Chibawawa, in the east of Mozambique. Several months later a different guerrilla camp was hit. At first cholera was suspected but this seemed unlikely since the guerrillas' diet only consisted of milk and rice. After autopsy on one of the deceased, it turned out warfarin, an anticoagulant, was responsible. It probably had been mixed with the rice.⁴³

Cholera, used to poison water sources, could also be very deadly. The bacterium causes diarrhoea and dehydration and thrives in aquatic environments. More sophisticated CBW programs in history have managed to weaponize cholera by making it transmittable by inhalation. The Rhodesian program didn't do that, possibly because it wasn't necessary, probably because they didn't have the scientific know-how. But even in its less lethal form, the contaminated water allegedly killed hundreds of guerrillas. On top of that it forced guerrillas into certain areas and to carry more water and less ammo.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Ellert, *The Rhodesian Front War*, p. 112, 113; Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 81, 83, 111- 113; Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts*, p. 84; Mangold, Goldberg, *Plague Wars*, p. 221.

⁴¹ Mangold, Goldberg, *Plague Wars*, p. 214; Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 106-109.

⁴² Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 107-109.

⁴³ Stiff, *See You in November*, p. 310; Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 110.

⁴⁴ Ellert, *The Rhodesian Front War*, p. 112, 113; Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 84, 112; Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts*, p. 89, 157.

This last effect was always a secondary objective. The primary purpose of the CBW program was to kill and it was considered very effective in that regard. Flower writes that hundreds of insurgents died because of it. ZIPRA Commander Nicholas Nkomo claimed the CBW effort was the most effective strategy deployed against them. Rhodesian leadership and Symington believed the program was more effective than Fireforce, at least initially. This may well have been the case since ZANLA and ZIPRA guerrillas still tried to avoid direct contact with the RSF as much as possible. A 1977 COMOPS assessment is however the only official estimate there is to support these claims. Up till June 28th of that year the program allegedly killed 809 guerrillas. When extrapolating that number for the rest of the war, as multiple scholars have done, the total number could have been in the thousands.⁴⁵

It is hard to tell if this assessment is correct. As mentioned earlier McGuinness suspected that kill rates were inflated by one of his Special Branch subordinates. It is also unknown if the COMOPS' estimate included the use of cholera or was only concerned with the CBW program. The most recent extrapolation of the COMOPS' figure suggests that the CBW program killed somewhere between 1239 and 2427 guerrillas during the Rhodesian Bush War. Taking into account the roughly 5000 contaminated items produced, this estimate seems plausible.⁴⁶

Apart from guerrillas also civilians were hit by poison. In some instances store owners unwittingly sold doctored clothes to the public. Bindura General Hospital reported multiple cases of parathion poisoning. The symptoms were treated but because the source of the disease was unknown, patients sometimes returned with the same complaints. Sloppy distribution of poisoned cans of beef in the Arcturus District, East Mashonaland, caused the deaths of several civilians. In 1976 a Selous Scouts team, operating in the Ruya Wildlife Sanctuary near Mozambique, reportedly contaminated Ruya River with vibrio cholerae. At roughly the same time the downstream villages experienced a cholera outbreak. A heavily redacted FBI report mentions similar operations which resulted in the death of hundreds of people and animals.⁴⁷

The Wedge

Apart from killing guerrillas the CBW effort had other consequences. Civilians inherently play an important role in guerrilla wars. Combatants hide amongst them and rely on them for supplies, information and shelter. Because the CBW program used civilians for the dissemination of their goods the role of the rural population in the Rhodesian Bush War became even more important, especially the relationship between civilians and guerrillas.

When villagers, with or without their knowledge, helped to poison guerrillas, a retaliation could follow. Guerrillas organized witch hunts to find the ones responsible. These were mainly targeted at adult women and could become extremely violent. Suspects were tortured and executed. Guerrillas, who of course heavily depended on the help of the rural population, grew increasingly paranoid towards their beneficiaries. Villagers, who had experienced the violent nature of these witch hunts, became more hesitant about helping guerrilla units. In those situations the CBW effort drove a wedge between the two groups.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 116, 118, 122; Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts*, p. 159, 166.

⁴⁶ Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 117, 118.

⁴⁷ Martinez, "The History of the Use of Bacteriological and Chemical Agents", *Third World Quarterly*, p. 1164; Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts*, p. 166; Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 108, 109, 112, 113; Ellert, *The Rhodesian Front War*, p.112.

⁴⁸ White, "Poisoned Food, Poisoned Uniforms, and Anthrax", p. 224; Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 81, 83.

Some scholars, like Luise White and Ian Martinez, believe this was an intentional effect. They point to the program's knowledge of traditional beliefs and the prominence of poison in those beliefs. The Rhodesian Security Forces had even published a book on this topic in 1974 called *The African Way of Life*. This knowledge was used on multiple occasions. Selous Scouts units threatened rural villagers thought to be guerrilla sympathizers by putting hyena carcasses on their doorstep in the middle of the night. Allegedly one scout had trained a hyena puppy to follow him wherever he went. The strong connection between hyena's and witchcraft led rural observers of these tactics to believe that both the threat and the Scout were surrounded by some supernatural power. It is not so strange then to think that the use of poison, also very strongly connected to witchcraft, was meant to accomplish a similar effect.⁴⁹

The CBW program was aware their poisons did more than just kill. McGuinness wrote in his report to CIO and Special Branch: *Nineteen African civilians in the Beit Bridge area have been murdered by terrorists who believed that they were responsible for giving them poisoned food. A Mount Darwin stationed Special Branch officer reportedly stated: It makes them go after the very people who've been helping them. They've never once in all the time we've been doing this put the clothing together with their illness, so that's always covered the store owners, and we've never lost one of them yet, but as soon as they start dropping like flies and visiting a village or two, suddenly they're thinking everyone out there is a witch, and I'm not pulling your piss. They really believe in witchcraft. Soon they're slotting [killing] all kinds of people who never did a thing to them, and before you know it, the survivors, or what's left of them, are staying away from the villages altogether and the locals aren't doing anything to help 'em. Buggers don't even take the time to think this through, the stupid sots.*⁵⁰

The RSF were definitely aware their CBW effort disrupted the relationship between guerrillas and civilians. There is however no evidence to support the claim that the Rhodesians had anticipated this outcome. When the serendipitous effect of the poison operations was discovered, no plans were made to intensify the program. While the CBW team tried to perfect the lethality of their poisons, no steps were taken to increase their psychological impact. The Rhodesian army apparently recognized how the program could drive a wedge between civilians and guerrillas but didn't deem it as important as killing guerrillas.⁵¹

A possible reason for this could be that retaliations and the subsequent wedges were mostly confined to the beginning stage of the program. In Rusape, a village in the east of Rhodesia, multiple guerrillas got sick or died because of poison. ZANLA section commanders slaughtered and tortured a number of villagers as an act of revenge. The surviving villagers turned on ZANLA and reported all their movements to the Rhodesian authorities. To prevent such a setback in the future, ZANLA swiftly issued instructions to their troops forbidding them to retaliate unless hard proof existed of someone's collaboration with the RSF. This drastically reduced the number of conflicts between guerrillas and villagers.⁵²

⁴⁹ Terence Ranger, Beatrice Nicolini ed., *Studies in Witchcraft, War and Peace in Africa*, (New York 2006), p. 367; Cross, *Dirty War*, p. xxviii, 122, 123, 125.

⁵⁰ Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 83, 123.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 104, 106, 122.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 116, 117, 123.

Success

It is hard to say to what extent the Rhodesian CBW program reached its own military goals. On the one hand the estimated number of CBW related deaths declined every year by about 30% because guerrillas simply became more aware of the program's modus operandi. The disrupting effect on the relationships between civilians and guerrillas saw a similar decline. On the other hand the program reached its main objective; to kill a lot of guerrillas. Even when sticking to the more conservative numbers, the percentage of CBW related guerrilla deaths approached 15%, which is extremely high. Most importantly this goal was reached in a cheap and, for the Rhodesian military at least, a relatively risk free way.⁵³

Not surprisingly the Rhodesian military leadership was very pleased with the program's results, especially in the beginning. After the complete elimination of two or three guerrilla camps it was even suggested the CBW program could become a decisive tool to win the war. This was however unrealistic. The recruitment rate of ZANLA and ZIPRA was always higher than the kill rate of the program and the RSF's conventional means of war combined. In the end the CBW effort is seen as a relatively successful, but ultimately not decisive, attempt by the Rhodesian army to win the Rhodesian Bush War for the European ruling elite.⁵⁴

This conclusion seems too blunt. It focuses on the RSF's idea of success, which is heavily defined by kill rates. From that point of view a case can indeed be made that the CBW program was successful. It ignores however the long term effects of the program on rural civilians and the way they interacted with guerrillas and the Rhodesian authorities. The next two chapters will discuss these hitherto underexposed consequences of poison in the Rhodesian Bush War.

⁵³ White, "Poisoned Food, Poisoned Uniforms, and Anthrax", p. 221; Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 119, 121; Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts*, p. 159.

⁵⁴ Cross, *Dirty War*, p. 121.

Chapter Two: Guerrillas, Mhondoro and Civilians

Power Vacuums

Guerrillas weren't immediately hailed as liberators when arriving in an area. Small gangs of young, armed and often violent men were not automatically welcomed as saviours. Eventually, through a variety of strategies and methods, guerrillas managed to earn some form of legitimacy. Poison played a role in that process. In order to fully understand how the CBW effort influenced the relationship between civilians and guerrillas, it is crucial to first take a look at this relationship. To do that it is necessary to see how power and legitimacy were organized before the war started and before guerrillas entered the picture.

The majority of Zimbabweans lived in the Tribal Trust Lands. Since the Southern Rhodesian Land Apportionment Act of 1930 the country was divided into five regions. Regions 1, 2 and 3, consisting of centrally located land very suitable for agriculture, were reserved for white settlement. Region 5 and a small part of region 2, generally located near the periphery, were turned into TTLs. The European elite had more land than it could cultivate which meant a lot of farmland remained unused. The soil in the TTLs on the other hand was swiftly oversaturated, forcing great numbers of Zimbabweans to find work in the cities or on white commercial farms.⁵⁵

In an attempt to combat the declining quality of agriculture in the TTLs the Rhodesian government passed the African Land Husbandry Act in 1951. The main idea was to replace communal ownership of land among natives with private ownership. Some suggest the goal was to create a loyal African Rhodesian middle class. The implementation of the Act didn't have the desired effect however. First of all victims of the new system weren't compensated. Secondly the limit of five head of cattle per family, intended to protect grazing areas, was seen as a limit on wealth. Thirdly local chiefs lost their authority to allocate land, as they had done in the past.⁵⁶

The Land Husbandry Act made the Southern Rhodesian government very unpopular which benefitted the African nationalist movements. They could tap into the growing discontent caused by the Act. In order to counter the widespread dissatisfaction, the government started to change its attitude towards the chiefs. Their position was revalidated and their salaries were increased. Most importantly they were organized in provincial assemblies which allowed the chiefs to communicate their views directly to government officials. This relationship became so good that in 1959 the chiefs, in their provincial assemblies, sided openly with the Southern Rhodesian Government.⁵⁷

Although this can be seen as a political victory, it undoubtedly had its negative effects in the years to come. When the Land Husbandry Act was suspended in 1965, not only the government's image was damaged, so was the authority of the chiefs. Their legitimacy was shown to be directly dependent on the unpopular regime. Chiefs were more and more seen as part of the problem, rather than the solution. Their waning legitimacy created power vacuums for others to fill.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ G. Chavunduka, *Traditional Healers and the Shona Patient*, (Gwelo 1978), p. 2; Moorcraft, McLaughlin, *The Rhodesian War*, p. 21; Wilkinson, *Insurgency in Rhodesia, 1957-1973*, p. 7, 8; Cilliers, *Counter-Insurgency in Rhodesia*, p. 1, 2.

⁵⁶ Nyagumbo, *With the People*, p. 112; Wilkinson, *Insurgency in Rhodesia, 1957-1973*, p. 7, 8.

⁵⁷ Hubert Bucher, *Spirits and Power, An analysis of Shona cosmology*, (1980 Cape Town), p. 27.

⁵⁸ Chavunduka, *Traditional Healers and the Shona Patient*, p. 3; Bucher, *Spirits and Power*, p. 27.

Guerrillas

Guerrillas were recruited in multiple ways. In the early stages of the war, ZANLA and ZIPRA relied on voluntary recruitment. As both organizations had difficulties filling their ranks, they started to press gang people with intimidation and violence. The number of recruits rose but so did the number of deserters. Some deserters handed themselves in to the Rhodesian army. The RSF used these cases for press statements in which they accused ZANU and ZAPU of kidnapping. There was truth in those allegations. Because funds were allocated to guerrilla camps according to the number of recruits, the competition and rivalry between camps drove them to be forceful in their recruitment strategies. These became obsolete from 1975 and onwards due to the stream of refugees that crossed the Rhodesian borders and joined ZANLA camps in Mozambique and ZIPRA camps in Botswana and Zambia.⁵⁹

When guerrillas entered the country again they did so in groups of five people, all with their own specialty. The group was led by a commander. Second in command was the political commissar. He was the liaison between villagers and guerrillas. "His job is to introduce us to the masses and to instruct them in who we are, what we are going to do and why." The third man was responsible for security. It was his job to find out who were sympathetic to the cause and who were sell-outs. The fourth man was in charge of logistics. He took care of food, ammunition and equipment. The fifth was a medical assistant.⁶⁰

Guerrillas were usually between 19 and 24 years old and rarely older than 27. Family obligations prevented older Zimbabweans from joining the war. They were also dissuaded by the possibility of violent retaliations on their families if the RSF found out they had joined ZANLA or ZIPRA. Rhodesians who did join came from numerous backgrounds. The first ZANLA guerrillas for example were mostly Korekore from the north-west of Mashonaland because ZANLA had its first operational zone there. As the war progressed the guerrillas started to come from all over Rhodesia.⁶¹

Although guerrilla groups almost exclusively consisted of Zimbabweans, the Smith government portrayed them as foreigners, turning the civil war between Rhodesians into a defensive war against alien forces. This myth was supported by the fact that guerrillas were purposefully never deployed in their own home areas. The ZANLA leadership feared that ties of kin or friendships might hinder them in their revolutionary work. To sever these ties guerrillas adopted Chimurenga names, such as: Comrade Bvisai Mabunhu (Comrade Cast Out the Boers), Comrade Takawanda PaChipuriro (Comrade We are Many at the Town of Chipuriro), or simply Comrade Dracula, Comrade James Bond or Comrade Lead. In a sense the government's myth was correct. Guerrillas re-entered Rhodesia as strangers.⁶²

⁵⁹ Josiah Tungamirai, Ngwabi Bhebe ed., Terence Ranger ed., *Soldiers in Zimbabwe's Liberation War*, (Suffolk 1995), p. 40, 41; Maxwell, *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe*, p. 120; Moorcraft, McLaughlin, *The Rhodesian War*, p. 38, 39.

⁶⁰ Lan, *Guns and Rain*, p. 127.

⁶¹ Tungamirai, Bhebe ed., Ranger ed., *Soldiers in Zimbabwe's Liberation War*, p. 43; Maxwell, *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe*, p. 139; Wilkinson, *Insurgency in Rhodesia, 1957-1973*, p. 11, 12.

⁶² Gumbo, *Guerrilla Snuff*, p. 21, 22; Lan, *Guns and Rain*, p. 125.

Mediums

Because they were strangers, guerrillas needed to establish legitimacy before they could count on the help of the people. ZIPRA and ZANLA recognized that the rural population was shifting its loyalty from chiefs, seen as puppets to the Smith regime, to spirit mediums. They were the key to winning the hearts and minds of the people. The main strategy from both guerrilla organizations was therefore to collaborate with the spirit mediums. Some of them were reluctant to do so and were intimidated to gain their support. Others were persuaded by the promise that the land would be given back to the people. Most of them saw the collaboration as a tool to further their own agendas.⁶³

Spirit mediums assisted guerrillas in all sorts of ways. They showed guerrilla groups secret paths to move through the area and hidden places to hide their weapons. They helped to recruit would be guerrillas and politicized the masses. Mediums also provided guerrillas with supernatural protection. By reading animal signs they could predict the future. *The spirit mediums gave us many good ideas. The chipungu (eagle) was a very important sign. If we saw them we would take off our shoes and our hats. If they flew down and made a great deal of noise, we knew there was trouble coming and would leave that place. If they flew round peacefully we knew we were safe. If you saw two eagles fighting in the sky that meant that the bomber planes were coming. In March 1979 we saw two eagles fighting near Gonono. We made off. The planes came and bombed but no one was hurt. If an eagle should fly over our base in the forest we all take off our hats. If anyone refuses there is no doubt they will die. You had to watch out for the chipungu. If it twice makes a noise, that is very dangerous. If you see a tortoise in the path you will have a good journey for at least two or three days. But if you find a snake, that is bad. Turn back. The enemy is near.*⁶⁴

Spirit mediums also performed rituals which provided guerrillas with access to holy places, burial caves and sacred mountains. Normally this access was reserved for village elders and headmen. By doing this, mediums had not only given guerrillas perfect hiding places but placed them in the same category as people of significance, which added to their status. Additionally the shrines gave supernatural powers to the African nationalists. Joshua Nkomo, leader of ZAPU, was for example protected by the Dula Shrine. ZANU leader Mugabe enjoyed similar protection from the Bembe Shrine.⁶⁵

Spirit mediums were able to bestow the guerrillas with this kind of protection and legitimacy because of their relationship with ancestral spirits. In large parts of Rhodesia ancestors influenced the lives of individuals. They saw and judged everyone and rewarded or punished them accordingly; with healthy children, fortune and prosperity in case of the first, with diseases and epidemics in case of the latter. Not everyone could become an ancestral spirit. If the correct burial rituals weren't observed, the deceased would become a wandering soul who torments the living.⁶⁶

The spirit mediums' legitimacy originated mainly from their relationship with one particular type of spirit, the *Mhondoro*. *Mhondoro* are the ancestral spirits of former chiefs. The chiefs' power structure is hierarchical. When a chief dies, he remains a part of this structure as a spirit. The more

⁶³ Maxwell, *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe*, p. 120, 138; White, "Poisoned Food, Poisoned Uniforms, and Anthrax", p. 223; Gumbo, *Guerrilla Snuff*, p. 42; Maxwell, *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe*, p. 138.

⁶⁴ Lan, *Guns and Rain*, p. 157,158; Tungamirai, Bhebe ed., Ranger ed., *Soldiers in Zimbabwe's Liberation War*, p. 41; Maxwell, *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe*, p. 120; Tungamirai, Bhebe ed., Ranger ed., *Soldiers in Zimbabwe's Liberation War*, p. 41; Maxwell, *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe*, p. 131; Moore, *Rhodesia*, p. 172.

⁶⁵ Ranger, Nicolini ed., *Studies in Witchcraft, War and Peace in Africa*, p. 131, 132, 364, 365; Maxwell, *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe*, p. 131,132, 142, 143; Gumbo, *Guerrilla Snuff*, p. 12-14.

⁶⁶ Cilliers, *Counter-Insurgency in Rhodesia*, p. 165; White, "Poisoned Food, Poisoned Uniforms, and Anthrax", p. 222,223; Gumbo, *Guerrilla Snuff*, p. 11, 12, 21.

prominent his position while living, the higher his status as *Mhondoro*. Just like the chiefs, before they allied with the Rhodesian government, they were the owners and rulers of the land and the spiritual sons of Mwari the Creator.⁶⁷

Since the discontent of the rural population was caused by unpopular legislation and the unfair distribution of land, *Mhondoro*, as the spiritual owners of the land, were extremely important. By channelling *Mhondoro* ancestors, spirit mediums offered the peasantry a way to conceptually understand and control the war. The *Mhondoro*, and indirectly the spirit mediums, became symbols for the peasants' right to their land. The mediums presented themselves as bridge between the former chiefs and the population. This way they were able to fill the power vacuum left behind by the living chiefs.⁶⁸

With the *Mhondoro* as their historical source, mediums could also alter traditional stories, genealogies and legends to fit a new revolutionary narrative. Diki Rukadza, medium in Manicaland, recreated the myth of Chief Gambiza. In the myth Gambiza is brutally murdered and his family forced to flee to Mozambique. In an attempt to restore spiritual order the heroic spirit, Nyawada, organizes a resistance. With the help of *Mhondoro* spirits he manages to take revenge on the murderers and make sure that Gambiza's family returns to power. These kinds of histories provided guerrillas with revolutionary credentials. They too came from Mozambique to restore the spiritual order; this time by taking back the *Mhondoro*'s land from the Rhodesian government.⁶⁹

Although the *Mhondoro* were irrelevant for Rhodesia's Christians, either civilian or guerrilla, and the majority of youngsters and women did not actively subscribe to a *Mhondoro* cult, their importance should not be underestimated. Village elders and Rhodesians with royal lineages or from leading houses all stood to gain status by the rise of *Mhondoro* cults. Many people had less political motives though and adhered to the spirit mediums out of self-preservation. Because mediums had given the guerrillas legitimacy, they also had some control over them. Often they used this limited control to protect their followers against the young, violent men who had entered their society and the equally violent youngsters already present.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Michael Gelfand, *Shona Religion, With Special Reference To The Makorekore*, (Cape Town 1962), p. 156, 157; Lan, *Guns and Rain*, p. 32, 34; Cilliers, *Counter-Insurgency in Rhodesia*, p. 166; Gumbo, *Guerrilla Snuff*, p. 20.

⁶⁸ Maxwell, *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe*, p. 131, 142.

⁶⁹ Gumbo, *Guerrilla Snuff*, p. 12, 13; Maxwell, *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe*, p. 131, 132.

⁷⁰ Maxwell, *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe*, p. 135-138; Cilliers, *Counter-Insurgency in Rhodesia*, p. 97; Gumbo, *Guerrilla Snuff*, p. 38.

Mujiba

The collaboration with spirit mediums wasn't the only mutually beneficial relationship between guerrillas and rural society. As soon as guerrillas entered a region, they started to recruit young adolescents as so called *Mujiba*. The *Mujiba* were the eyes, ears and arms of guerrilla groups. They spied on other villagers to find out if any of them were sell-outs. They carried supplies and equipment over huge distances, sometimes smuggling them across borders or through no-go zones. At the end of the war there were an estimated 50.000 of them.⁷¹

Many were seduced by the freedom, status and power the role of *Mujiba* brought them. *"We used to beat old people who did not respond to the word preached by the boys [guerrillas]... those we thought were sell-outs. We were responsible for telling the boys of such people. That person was sometimes beaten or even shot to death. Since we were young boys we would go with girls and if we found that their father was refusing his daughter to go with us that's the very time we would find ways of creating enmity between that man and the boys."*⁷²

Mujiba didn't only try to control their elders with their newly acquired status, they also saw opportunities to get even with the rich and unleash their ethnic prejudices. Presumed outsiders were harassed, beaten and robbed throughout the war. In some instances guerrillas had to step in and prevent youngsters from becoming too dominant. *"Children took advantage of the comrades and went out of control. Parents came to tell us that they could not control their children. We called the children and the parents and cross-examined them and disciplined the children."*⁷³

Guerrillas held sway over the *Mujiba* for two reasons. The youngsters were only able to assume their *Mujiba* role of relative power, status and wealth because of the guerrillas. Secondly the guerrillas were thought to have magical abilities. Some were given by spirit mediums, others acquired in training camps. Many people believed for example that guerrillas could vanish into thin air. *"Oh yes, we knew that the peasants believed that we could simply disappear. We knew that very well. This was a technique we had acquired during our training. There was nothing magical about it but we allowed the peasants to go on believing because it was to our advantage that they did so."*⁷⁴

Taboos

Spirit mediums tried to control the *Mujiba*. They did so by using taboos. Many taboos concerned the production and consumption of food. Sooty cooking pots were not allowed to be washed in a well because these pots, and their association with fire, would cause the wells to dry up. Pumpkin leaves, called *Muboora*, should not be eaten because they stretch. This could cause the war to drag on. Other taboos were more social in nature. Pregnant women should be avoided because their pains could transfer onto the men. The blood of innocent people should not be spilled.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Maxwell, *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe*, p. 136; Lan, *Guns and Rain*, p. 125, 127; Cilliers, *Counter-Insurgency in Rhodesia*, p. 97; Balaam, *Bush War Operator*, 134, 135.

⁷² Maxwell, *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe*, p. 136; Gumbo, *Guerrilla Snuff*, p. 123.

⁷³ Cilliers, *Counter-Insurgency in Rhodesia*, p. 97; Maxwell, *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe*, p. 136; Gumbo, *Guerrilla Snuff*, p.123.

⁷⁴ Lan, *Guns and Rain*, p. 128,129.

⁷⁵ Maxwell, *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe*, p. 135, 137.

Guerrillas also had to deal with the mediums' taboos. Their function was twofold. On the one hand taboos were meant to protect the rural population; on the other hand they enhanced the guerrillas' legitimacy. Taboos on sex and certain types of food were often used to associate guerrillas with hunters and ancestors. Hunters weren't allowed to have sex before a hunt and shouldn't eat okra. By abiding to these taboos, guerrillas could become hunters and subsequently could win legitimacy. The ZANLA and ZIPRA leadership made it clear to their combatants that these rules should be followed. They wanted to gain legitimacy by becoming hunters instead of losing legitimacy by causing unwanted pregnancies.⁷⁶

In theory taboos were a way for elders and mediums to control the youth. In case of the guerrillas, it somewhat worked. They had something to gain by staying clear of taboos. The *Mujiba* however had no interest in religious legitimacy. Although they believed in *Mhondoro*, *Mujiba* actively broke their mediums' rules. Taboos on spilling innocent blood and extramarital sex were mostly ignored. *Mujiba* exploited the guerrillas' need for devoted helpers and used their new position of dominance to do as they pleased.⁷⁷

The Situation

Spirit mediums, the new leaders of the people, saw two kinds of youngsters gain prominence in their societies, guerrillas and *Mujiba*. With the first, collaboration was mutually beneficial. Guerrillas could tap into the mediums' practical and supernatural knowledge, enjoy the spiritual privileges bestowed upon them, and present themselves as warriors of the *Mhondoro*. Mediums on the other hand gained access to their own militia, saw their new found political authority confirmed and were promised to get back the lands now in possession of European Rhodesians.

A common enemy and pragmatism rather than a real ideological alignment brought the two groups together. The African Nationalists never intended for spirit mediums to hold major power when the war was over. Mediums mainly had no other choice to work with the guerrillas and tried to make the best of the situation. Some embraced their revolutionary role, others were forced into it. The arrival of guerrillas in rural society was like a force of nature. If resisted the damage could be severe. Cooperation was the best option.⁷⁸

The *Mujiba* were a lot harder to influence since they didn't really care for spiritual legitimacy. Mediums and *Mhondoro* ancestors held little to no sway over them. Even the use of taboos by elders and mediums didn't help to keep the young men from doing what they wanted. Only guerrillas could control the *Mujiba* because they were responsible for empowering them. This gave guerrilla groups more leverage over mediums and village elders. Failing to collaborate could lead to unleashed *Mujiba*. Rhodesia's rural societies and their leaders were essentially held hostage by guerrilla groups and their *Mujiba* followers.

Legitimacy came from the spirit mediums but the real power came from the barrel of an AK-47. With this power guerrillas succeeded in getting the mediums and *Mhondoro* on their side. This subsequently brought them the legitimacy to win over the majority of Rhodesia's rural population. It was in this complex web of collaboration, intimidation and different interests that the CBW effort introduced its poison.

⁷⁶ Idem.

⁷⁷ Idem.

⁷⁸ Lan, *Guns and Rain*, p. 129.

Chapter Three: Poison, Witchcraft and Growing Legitimacy

Poison and Witchcraft

The use of poison was not new in the region. G. Knight-Bruce, bishop of Bloemfontein in 1886 went on a mission to the Zambesi River. The goal of the mission was to visit chiefs throughout Mashonaland and convince them to accept religious teachers. On his voyage Knight-Bruce spoke with and wrote about Lobengula, second king of the Mthwakazi kingdom. According to him the kingdom's politics were full of poison. When he arrived the king had just survived a poison attempt by one of his wives. She was forced to hang herself. Nobengula was very cautious about poison. *He never drank anything among his own people that had not been tasted before, and he kept a woman as "taster". I remember that she got extraordinarily fat.*⁷⁹

Poison wasn't only used for politics in the higher echelons. The arrows of Nobengula's guards were "*very well made and poisoned*". Poison also played a very important role in practices of witchcraft. Knight-Bruce wrote about the high number of suicides in the country. People who were accused of using witchcraft were forced to drink poison. According to Knight-Bruce this was mainly a political and social tool. The accuser stood to gain the goods of the condemned which encouraged witch-hunts.⁸⁰

The concept of witchcraft was very much alive nearly a century later. Many Zimbabweans were raised to fear witches. The image may have differed from region to region but the essence was roughly the same. It is believed that in nature good and evil powers can be found. The evil power is called *uroyi*. *Uroyi* is the Shona word for 'the antisocial act', the harming of another individual. It is also the word for the spirit responsible for such an act. The person housing this spirit and perpetrating *uroyi* is called a *muroyi*, a witch. They were mainly women but not exclusively.⁸¹

Witchcraft is available to everyone. It is the negative counterpart to socially positive belief and ritual. Mediums used the same power to protect the community and were respected for it. When the power is used to harm, it is considered *uroyi*. Some witches acquired their *uroyi*, their magical abilities, on their own. They were called day witch because they were active during the day. Most witches however inherited their powers from a deceased parent or grandparent. They were called night witches, and were seen as more powerful. Just like spirit mediums could channel good spirits, such as *Mhondoro*, so too could *muroyi* channel the powers of their witchcraft using ancestors. Via their ancestors witches obtained super-human powers to do evil. Some witches said the spirit told them to kill and eat people, often their own children, and to inflict damage on the community.⁸²

The main weapon in the arsenal of the witch was poison. Witches possessed calabashes filled with poisonous substances. Magic herbs and roots were secretly passed on from *muroyi* to *muroyi*. Poisoning a victim's food or beer was standard procedure for a witch. When *muroyi* became old, they became careless with their substances and often accidentally killed themselves. Not taking the precautionary steps when working with poison would lead to insanity and death. The connection between witches and poison is so strong that *uroyi*, the power to harm, and poison are synonymous.⁸³

⁷⁹ Moorcraft, McLaughlin, *The Rhodesian War*, p. 19; G.W.H. Knight-Bruce, *Memories of Mashonaland*, (1895 New York), p. 70, 77, 78, 251;; Moore, *Rhodesia*, p. 162, 163.

⁸⁰ G.W.H. Knight-Bruce, *Memories of Mashonaland*, p. 77, 78, 93.

⁸¹ Ranger, Nicolini ed., *Studies in Witchcraft, War and Peace in Africa*, p. 353-355; Moore, *Rhodesia*, p. 162, 163.

⁸² Gelfand, *The African Witch*, p. 23, 25, 45; Bucher, *Spirits and Power*, p. 105, 108, 109.

⁸³ Chavunduka, *Traditional Healers and the Shona Patient*, p. 14; Gelfand, *The African Witch*, p. 32

Witches would plant the poison or poisonous object on a path, in the victim's home, or in the victim's food. The poisons of the night witch could cause a great number of diseases, the day witch was mainly associated with *chitsinga* and *chipotswa*, two variations of rheumatism. Pain in bones or joints is often ascribed to the work of a day witch. When poisoned the *uroyi* would enter the victim's body in one spot, usually the mouth, and circulate through the entire body. Eventually it would settle in one place where it causes the most pain. When settled the illness could be treated. A spiritual specialist would make incisions on the site of the pain and suck the *uroyi* out of the wound with a cupping horn. Ashes of special roots would then be rubbed into the wound. This was a very common treatment.⁸⁴

When someone died, especially if the person was young or seemed healthy, witchcraft could not be ruled out. If disease would strike amongst people or cattle, it could well be caused by *uroyi*. Snakes, owls and hyenas that came too close to people were presumed to be a witch's familiars. These familiars were held responsible for disseminating the poisonous substance around the houses of victims. When a woman suffered multiple stillbirths or her children had died during birth or shortly after, she could be a witch. If someone was extraordinarily successful compared to the rest of society, this could be attributed to witchcraft. In some cases even confident behaviour could have its origins in *uroyi*. All kinds of power, whether it was material or immaterial, could be associated with witchcraft since they include the power to harm.⁸⁵

The way to unmask a witch was also with poison. This was done in so called 'poison ordeals'. If a person was accused of using *uroyi* a spirit medium would make a poisonous liquid. Its contents could vary from medium to medium. The suspect would then drink the liquid. If it caused the suspect to vomit, innocence was proven. If not, the witch was unmasked and would be killed. Vomiting was also used to cleanse victims of *uroyi*. This could happen literally but also figuratively by confessing anything that could have made the victim vulnerable to the attack of a witch.⁸⁶

Death by poison was so established in Rhodesian rural life that the victims had their own cosmological position. Normally when family members die they become spirits. They protect the family and communicate with their progeny via spirit mediums. When someone was killed by poison, they would become angered spirits. Instead of protecting its relatives, the spirit would appear in their dreams. He would tell them he was killed and ask them to be brought into contact with the living. Via a spirit medium the angered spirit would tell them who killed him and demand compensation from the guilty family.⁸⁷

Witchcraft was often used as social or political weapon. Allegations of witchcraft were almost always foreshadowed by internal tensions within communities. Conflicts within families or groups, whether it concerned questions of succession, inheritance, wealth distribution or general hostility, were not supposed to be discussed in the public sphere. Accusing someone of using *uroyi* was an excuse to break open the conflict and an extreme way to divide the group and resolve the conflict by sheer force.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Gelfand, *The African Witch*, p. 45, 46; Chavunduka, *Traditional Healers and the Shona Patient*, p. 17.

⁸⁵ Bucher, *Spirits and Power*, p. 111; Cilliers, *Counter-Insurgency in Rhodesia*, p. 166, 167; Moore, *Rhodesia*, p. 164-166.

⁸⁶ Gelfand, *Shona Religion*, p. 164,165; Bucher, *Spirits and Power*, p. 123.

⁸⁷ Gelfand, *Shona Religion*, p. 69.

⁸⁸ Bucher, *Spirits and Power*, p. 108.

Witches were always people from within the same *rudzi*, from same type, lineage or group. The accused and complainant usually knew each other well. More often than not their contact was frequent. Because a witch derives his or her power from ancestor spirits, family ties are very important. These spirits could hold grudges, feel jealousy and become hostile but only did so along family lines. Outsiders, travellers, strangers, could not be harmed by witchcraft. Only after becoming part of the community were they at risk. Witchcraft is inherently a threat from within.⁸⁹

Guerrillas and Witches

Guerrillas who were targeted by the Rhodesian CBW program were not merely poisoned. They were hit by witchcraft. Who else would use such a weapon? Many rural civilians suspected that the Rhodesian Security Forces were in some way behind the attacks. Witches were nonetheless seen as the main perpetrators. It was believed that the RSF simply sponsored already existing “poisoning rings” within society. Zimbabweans saw no contradiction between witchcraft and biochemical warfare.⁹⁰

Guerrilla commanders had different ideas about what was going on. Being educated in imperialist practices from around the world, they began to suspect the poison attacks had little to do with witches. One commander had read about the Algerian War. “[The] French used some kind of chemical to kill guerrillas”, “[P]erhaps there was a secret weapon used by the Rhodesians to kill us and in such a way as to cause mistrust between us and the locals.” In their eyes the RSF was mainly responsible. The civilians who disseminated the poison were just pawns.⁹¹

ZANLA and ZIPRA commanders didn’t mind that the poison attacks were attributed to witchcraft. It allowed guerrillas to take an active stance against witches. When guerrillas entered a region they could pose as witch-hunters instead of strangers. This was beneficial in two ways. First of all it gave guerrillas and their *Mujiba* an excuse to act forcefully against any suspected sell-outs. They were now not only portrayed as traitors to the cause but also as *uroyi* using dangers to the community. “When the comrades arrived they said: there are sell-outs and witches in this village. They called a certain woman and said: let us see the human flesh you are concealing. The woman fell down and began to cry. They said: tell your children to come here and see. She called them. The comrades said: Your mother is a witch. The children began to cry. Some of them said: if there had been no war our mother would still be alive.”⁹²

The portraying of sell-outs as witches may have had another reason. Although often described as such the Rhodesian Bush War wasn’t simply a racial war between white and black. The RSF consisted of many African Rhodesian soldiers, African Rhodesian chiefs worked closely together with the Rhodesian government and rural Zimbabweans were actively poisoning their fellow men. Furthermore the African nationalist movement had split down the middle into ZANU and ZAPU, turning African nationalists against each other. This all made the war much more nuanced. From a struggle against the white outsider the war became about finding the enemy within, in other words, the witch. The term sell-out and witch became synonymous.⁹³

⁸⁹ Lan, *Guns and Rain*, p. 37, 168, 169; Gelfand, *The African Witch*, p. 50.

⁹⁰ White, “Poisoned Food, Poisoned Uniforms, and Anthrax”, p. 225; Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts*, p. 155; Sachikonye, *When a State Turns on its Citizens*, p. 9.

⁹¹ White, “Poisoned Food, Poisoned Uniforms, and Anthrax”, p. 225; Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts*, p. 155.

⁹² Lan, *Guns and Rain*, p. 167; Moore, *Rhodesia*, p. 169.

⁹³ Ranger, Nicolini ed., *Studies in Witchcraft, War and Peace in Africa*, p. 369; Lan, *Guns and Rain*, p. 168,169; Maxwell, *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe*, p. 140; Sachikonye, *When a State Turns on its Citizens*, p. 9, 10; Moore, *Rhodesia*, p. 180, 181.

Being able to pose as witch-hunters had another benefit. Witches try to attack and disrupt the community. This makes them the cosmological nemeses of *Mhondoro* spirits and chiefs, who are in charge of protecting the community. Chiefs and *Mhondoro* have this responsibility because of their connection to the land. They are in charge of the land and have an obligation to defend it. By taking the necessary spiritual precautions, chiefs could keep out the *uroyi*. With the new Rhodesian land legislation however the ties between chiefs and land were severed. Witches could roam the land freely and do as they pleased. The Rhodesian government and chiefs were blamed for this development. On top of that the government had also prohibited witch-hunting, regarding it as uncivilized. *“Before the English came we were allowed to drive out all evil doing persons and consequently did not die at the high rate that we do now.”*⁹⁴

Witch-hunting was done in service of the community. It was also the community that decided who the threat was and how the guerrillas should deal with this person. *“When we entered a village we didn’t ask people where the witches are. We waited until people complained about a person and then we went to interrogate them. If that person continued to deny he was a witch we left him alone. But if he admitted it we asked the people what sort of punishment he should be given and we carried it out. He could be set free if this is what they wanted but also he could be killed.”*⁹⁵

The hunting of witches was also done to gain favour from *Mhondoro* spirits and the mediums that channelled them. *“The two things that comrades like best were ancestors and beer. Many times the ancestors saved us when we were in the bush. If there were no ancestors we would surely have died. So many times we went to see the Mhondoro Musuma who was staying at Mushumbi Pools. This Mhondoro helped us as lot. He told us who all the sell-outs were. And this was very important. Many people died just because they had been betrayed.”*⁹⁶

By becoming witch-hunters, guerrillas provided a solution to the infestation of witches. While the government and the chiefs could not protect rural societies against the threat of *muroyi*, guerrillas could. They weren’t the only ones trying to solve this problem though. In 1976 a man named Makombe lead the so called Witchcraft Eradication Movement. He travelled mainly through the north-east of Rhodesia and persuaded the rural population to hand in their magical objects such as horns and charms for destruction. Spirit healers were asked to show their medicines. Medicines which the movement regarded as antisocial were also destroyed. Makombe was eventually killed by guerrillas.⁹⁷

Why exactly is unknown. Some thought Makombe used his own magical abilities to assist the Rhodesian government. Others thought it was because he destroyed magical objects to prevent guerrillas from using them. The most logical explanation seems to be that Makombe was too successful in his eradication campaign. Instead of killing witches, he reintegrated them into the community, a much less disrupting way of dealing with the problem. Afraid to lose their position as witch-hunters, guerrillas made sure they were the only solution to the witch-problem once again. Makombe was shot in the back with a bazooka.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Bucher, *Spirits and Power*, p. 112; Ranger, Nicolini ed., *Studies in Witchcraft, War and Peace in Africa*, p.367, 368; Moore, *Rhodesia*, p. 169.

⁹⁵ Lan, *Guns and Rain*, p. 168.

⁹⁶ Ibidem, p. 169.

⁹⁷ Maxwell, *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe*, p. 140; Ranger, Nicolini ed., *Studies in Witchcraft, War and Peace in Africa*, p.367, 368.

⁹⁸ Ranger, Nicolini ed., *Studies in Witchcraft, War and Peace in Africa*, p. 372; Maxwell, *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe*, p. 140.

Guerrillas had a lot to gain from their position as witch-hunters. Since they acted on behalf of *Mhondoro*, these spirits bestowed them with supernatural powers. Some guerrillas learned how to disappear into thin air. Others were able to communicate with eagles, snakes and tortoises. These powers had been reserved for hunters and warriors in the past. Guerrillas could join this illustrious group if they followed the spirit's restrictions. By doing so, guerrillas became like *Mhondoro*, one with the bush. It allowed them to live in the forest with ease and communicate with wild animals. Like hunters and warriors, guerrillas became figures in society serving legitimate power. They became living manifestations of the *Mhondoro*'s will and protectors of the lands. Instead of claiming the land as nationalist strangers, guerrillas claimed the land to liberate it in name of the royal ancestors.⁹⁹

Conclusion

With every phase of the Rhodesian Bush War, the Rhodesian Security Forces encountered more difficulties. In the first five years of the conflict, 1965-1970, they had managed to withstand the guerrilla forces with relative ease. Guerrillas were poorly trained and few in numbers. Between 1970 and 1972, a phase called The Lull, both ZANLA and ZIPRA started to regroup, formulate better strategies, make organizational improvements and build up their forces. From 1972 to 1975 these improvements paid off. A growing number of combatants entered the country, avoided direct confrontations and instead focussed on inflicting economic damage. They also managed to dismantle the Rhodesian intelligence networks called Ground Coverage.

This forced the RSF to become more unconventional in their anti-insurgency and intelligence gathering tactics. They enacted Operation Hurricane, meant to prevent guerrillas from entering the country by designating more troops to the area bordering Mozambique and Zambia. Simultaneously the Rhodesian army started to use Protected Villages, meant to separate guerrillas from their rural supporters by forcing parts of the rural population into camps. The idea was to take the guerrillas' main source of supplies away from them.

Operation Turkey had the same goal as the PVs but a different approach. Instead of removing the suppliers the Rhodesian government tried to control the supplies. Transporting food or owning more than directly necessary became illegal. Both Operation Turkey and the Protected Villages were however extremely hard to fully implement and very unpopular. The search for an unconventional answer to the guerrilla threat continued and culminated in the start of the CBW program.

Around 1975 anatomy professor Symington, using his acquaintance with Defence Minister Van der Byl, put forward the plan for such a program. The plan was green-lighted by Prime Minister Smith and brought under the responsibility of both the BSAP and the CIO. Rivalry between these organizations caused a lack of oversight and accountability which meant that Superintendent McGuinness, who was put in charge of the program, had relative freedom to do as he pleased. The program was rudimentary, cheap and amateurish; its team consisted mostly of former medical and veterinary students; the facilities at Bindura Fort, Mount Darwin and Symington's house weren't adequately equipped for processing poison and poisonous materials; and the poisons themselves were only made from chemicals readily available in Rhodesia.

⁹⁹ Ranger, Nicolini ed., *Studies in Witchcraft, War and Peace in Africa*, p. 362, 363, 372.

Nevertheless the program produced a number of very successful chemical- and biological weapons. Rodenticides Warfarin and Thallium were put in food, pesticide Parathion in clothes and Cholera in water. The availability of supplies, which the program bought from Christou's Madzima Trading, dictated the number of doctored goods produced. International sanctions heavily influenced the production process. It is likely that these weapons, when finished, were tested on humans but no conclusive evidence supports that claim. Similarly it cannot be proven that the program used Anthrax.

Crucial in the dissemination of poisoned goods were the Selous Scouts. They started as reconnaissance unit but as the war progressed their tasks became more unconventional. In order to fill the intelligence gap caused by the dismantling of Ground Coverage the Selous Scouts started carrying out pseudo operations. Small teams infiltrated strategic areas of the countryside posing as ZANLA or ZIPRA combatants. By acting like guerrillas they could tap into local knowledge and *Mujiba* information networks, subsequently learning more about real guerrillas in the area. For the CBW program this information was vital to plan targeted operations.

The dissemination itself took place in a variety of different ways. The Rhodesian army poisoned water sources along guerrilla infiltration routes with cholera. Abandoned stores in no-go areas were filled with doctored goods, as were regular stores in the Tribal Trust lands thought to become target of a guerrilla raid. Most common was the program's use of contact men and women, rural Zimbabweans who were prepared to supply guerrilla groups with poisoned supplies. Via these contacts the program even successfully infiltrated doctored goods into ZANLA and ZIPRA camps in Mozambique and Zambia respectively.

The main goal of disseminating poison, according to the people responsible, was to kill guerrillas. Unintentionally yet unsurprisingly poisoned goods also came into the hands of the public. How many civilians were killed, is unknown. Estimates based on a COMOPS assessment suggest the total number of guerrilla deaths caused by the CBW program was between 1239 and 2427. It is therefore not surprising that the program was regarded successful by friend and foe.

The consequences of the program didn't stop there though. Infected water sources along infiltration routes and in no-go zones forced guerrillas to carry more water and less ammunition. More importantly the use of poison had social effects. Almost from the very beginning of the program the CBW team was aware that their attacks drove a wedge between guerrillas and civilians. Because contact men and women, civilians, were the ones disseminating the doctored goods, guerrillas blamed the rural community for the death of their comrades. After a successful poison operation the survivors would retaliate.

These chains of events undermined popular support for the guerrillas' cause and sowed distrust between the two groups. The CBW team seemed however unaware that this wedging effect was very short-lived. After one of the first poison attacks ZANLA commanders retaliated by torturing and killing the suspected perpetrators. The remaining villagers immediately started to report guerrilla movements to the RSF. To prevent such disasters in the future, it was forbidden to retaliate without hard proof. This policy effectively killed off the wedging effect.

As far as the RSF was concerned the CBW program was a cheap, easy and relatively safe way of killing the enemy. Any disruptive social effects were considered a bonus but not part of the program's main objective. Kill rates were the main indicator for success. By looking at the program in this context people involved in the Rhodesian Bush War and scholars, such as Cross, who have written about it neglect the deeper social effects of poison on guerrilla-civilian relationships.

These relationships were characterized by power and legitimacy. The small groups of young, armed men were not immediately welcomed as liberators. Due to a combination of Rhodesian propaganda and the fact that guerrillas were never sent back to their home areas these groups entered the country as strangers. They were Zimbabwean but didn't enjoy the legitimacy of the people they promised to liberate.

Legitimacy in general was shifting during this period from Rhodesia's rural chiefs to spirit mediums. Discontent with the Rhodesian government grew from 1930 onwards when the Southern Rhodesian Land Apportionment Act allocated the colony's available agricultural land massively in favour of the European minority. The 1951 African Land Husbandry Act, which denied thousands of Zimbabweans the right to land and took power away from the rural chiefs, was even less popular. In an attempt to counter the widespread dissatisfaction the Rhodesian government revalidated the authority of the chiefs and organized them into provincial assemblies. For the chiefs, who now could directly discuss policy with government officials, this meant more political power. What they won in power, they lost in legitimacy. Chiefs were seen more and more as puppets of the regime. Their waning legitimacy created vacuums which spirit mediums tried to fill.

ZANLA and ZIPRA recognized that the rural population was shifting its loyalty to mediums and responded to that. Mediums were the key to gaining legitimacy and winning the hearts and minds of the people. Some were pressured into collaboration; others were appealed by the guerrillas' promise to give back the land to its rightful owners; most of them saw the guerrillas as tool to further their own agendas. On paper this collaboration was mutually beneficial.

Mediums assisted guerrillas in a variety of ways. They showed them paths and hiding places, they took care of their wounds and helped with recruitment. They interpreted animal signs for them, bestowed them with powers and protection, and allowed them to visit holy shrines, something normally reserved for chiefs and elders. Through this collaboration, mediums gave the guerrillas legitimacy of the *Mhondoro*.

Mhondoro are ancestor spirits of former chiefs. They rule over the land and protect its inhabitants. Since the current chiefs were considered to be sell-outs, their predecessors the *Mhondoro*, and the mediums who channelled them, became more important. By working together with spirit mediums, guerrillas were able to present themselves as fighters for the ancestral spirits. Instead of claiming Rhodesia in name of African nationalism or communism, they could claim the country back for the *Mhondoro*.

Mediums benefitted from this development because it allowed them to exert more influence over the guerrillas. If a guerrilla wanted to become a fighter for *Mhondoro* he had to adhere to specific rules and stay clear of taboos. It was forbidden to sleep with girls or to come near a pregnant woman; certain types of food were prohibited such as okra or pumpkin leaves; the blood of the innocent should not be spilled. Through these taboos spirit mediums had some control over the young, armed men that had entered their communities.

They needed that control to protect their people, not only from guerrillas but also from *Mujiba*. *Mujiba* were local teenagers who were recruited by ZANLA and ZIPRA groups. They transported food, equipment and information for them and spied on their own community to see if anyone was a sell-out. They could be very disruptive and dangerous in that last capacity. Whoever stood in their way could be handed over to "the boys" as sell-out. Similarly to the relationship between mediums and guerrillas, *Mujiba* were dependent on another group for their newfound status. But where guerrillas wanted to gain legitimacy by following the rules of mediums, *Mujiba* were not interested in spiritual legitimacy or taboos. Only guerrillas had some control over the *Mujiba*, since they were the ones that brought them into this position of relative power and wealth. The threat of violent *Mujiba* was an extra incentive for mediums to collaborate with the guerrillas. It was in this complex situation that the RSF introduced its CBWs.

The use of poison wasn't new to the region because it played an important role in witchcraft. Every person in theory is able to tap into sources of supernatural power. Sometimes these sources could be found in nature, more commonly they came from channelling ancestors. Spirit mediums used this power to protect the community and were respected for it. Witches on the other hand used it to harm. In that case it is called "*uroyi*", the antisocial act. Poison was the main weapon in the witch's

arsenal. Witches spiked beer; they planted poisonous objects on the path of their victim; they sent familiars like hyenas, snakes or owls to plant poison in their victim's home. The connection between poison and witchcraft is so strong that it is synonymous. Poison is *uroyi*.

If anything happened that was out of the ordinary, witchcraft could well be the cause. If someone died, especially if they were young and seemed healthy; if disease struck amongst the cattle; if a woman had suffered multiple stillbirths; if someone was extraordinarily successful, if someone was extremely confident. The possibility of witchcraft easily evoked suspicion. To unmask a witch poison again played a big role. In poison ordeals the innocence of the accused was put to the test.

Accusations of witchcraft were almost always accompanied by internal tensions within the family or community. Conflicts over succession, inheritance, wealth distribution or something else could all result in witchcraft allegations. It was a way to break open such conflicts and make them negotiable in the public sphere. Because witches derived their power mainly from ancestral spirits, they tended to only act along family lines. Outsiders were not threatened by the power of witches. Witchcraft is inherently a threat from within.

When guerrillas or civilians were killed by the CBW effort, they were not merely hit by poison attacks, they were targeted by witches. Many rural Zimbabweans held the government responsible for the growing number of witchcraft related incidents and believed that the regime sponsored poison rings within society. There was however no doubt that the poison itself came from witches. They were the real problem; the Rhodesian government just facilitated a situation in which they could thrive.

Guerrilla commanders had different ideas about the poison attacks and held the RSF responsible instead of witches. They knew about French chemical warfare in Algeria and suspected something similar was happening in Rhodesia. They didn't mind that the poison attacks were attributed to witchcraft though. It allowed guerrillas to pose as witch-hunters, which was beneficial in two ways. First of all it meant they could act more forcefully against sell-outs. They turned from traitors into *uroyi* using dangers to society. The terms sell-out and witch began to mean the same. Secondly the status of witch-hunter provided guerrillas with legitimacy.

Because witches attack the community from within and *Mhondoro* spirits, channelled by mediums, protect the community from within, they are natural opposites. By fighting witches, guerrillas were able to become fighters of the *Mhondoro*. Chiefs were supposed to protect the community against *uroyi* but had failed to do so. The Rhodesian government was held responsible for the active sponsoring of *muroyi*. Witch-hunting guerrillas presented themselves as the only solution to this problem. Any competition in that regard was eliminated, which is why Makombe, leader of the Witchcraft Eradication Movement, was brutally killed. Makombe managed to reintegrate witches into society while the methods of guerrillas were much more disruptive. Because his method was way more popular, he had to go. Guerrillas didn't want to lose their position as witch-hunter.

The Rhodesian CBW effort may have seemed successful to the people involved. It indeed managed to kill great numbers of guerrillas and had some beneficial side effects. But how poison helped to turn guerrillas into witch-hunters, was overlooked. That groups of violent, young men managed to become witch-hunters was because of poison. That they could become fighters for *Mhondoro* spirits, a position that brought them great legitimacy, knowledge of the bush and power over their surroundings, was because of poison. That they transformed from strangers into the rightful owners of the land, was because of poison. The Rhodesian CBW effort, often regarded as a successful military tool, actually was the beginning of the end.

Bibliography

- Alexander, J., McGregor, J. and Ranger, T.,
Violence and Memory, One Hundred Years in the 'Dark Forests' of Matabeleland, (Harare 2000).
- Balaam, A.,
Bush War Operator, Memoirs of the Rhodesian Light Infantry, Selous Scouts and Beyond, (Solihull 2014)
- Baxter, P.,
Bush War Rhodesia 1966-1980, (Pinetown 2014).
- Bird, E.,
Special Branch War: Slaughter in Rhodesian Bush, (Dorchester 2013).
- Brickhill, J.,
The Hidden Hand documentary, (BFI 1991).
Zimbabwe's Poisoned Legacy: Secret War in Southern Africa, *Covert Action Quarterly*, (1992-93) No. 43.
- Bruyne, M. de,
We Moeten Gaan, Nederlandse Boeren in Zimbabwe, (Amsterdam 2016).
- Bucher, H.,
Spirits and Power, An analysis of Shona Cosmology, (Cape Town 1980).
- Chavunduka, G.,
Traditional Healers and the Shona Patient, (Gwelo 1978).
- Chiondya, S.,
Harvest of Thorns, (Harare 1989).
- Cilliers, J.K.,
Counter-Insurgency in Rhodesia, (Dover 1985).
- Cocks, C.,
Fireforce, One Man's War in the Rhodesian Light Infantry, (Colorado 2007).
- Coen, N. and Nadler, E.,
Dead Silence, Fear and Terror on the Anthrax Trail, (Berkely 2009).
- Cross, G.,
Dirty War, Rhodesia and Chemical and Biological Warfare 1975-1980, (Solihull 2017).
- Croukamp, D.,
Bush War in Rhodesia, (Capetown 2006).
- Ellert, H.,
The Rhodesian Front War, Counterinsurgency and guerrilla warfare 1962-1980, (Gweru 1989).

- Evans, M.,
The Wretched of the Empire: Politics, Ideology and Counterinsurgency in Rhodesia, 1965-1980, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 18.2, (2007), 175-195.
- Flower, K.,
Serving Secretly, An Intelligence Chief On Record, (London 1987).
- Heidi G. Frontani and H. and Davis, J.,
Ideologies of Land and Place: Memories From Zimbabwe's War of Liberation, *South African Geographical Journal* (2008) 90 (1).
- Geldenhuys, P.,
Rhodesian Air Force Operations, (Paeroa 2014).
- Gelfand, M.,
Shona Religion, With Special Reference to the Makorekore, (Cape Town 1962).
The African Witch, (London 1967).
- Gumbo, M.,
Guerrilla Snuff, (Harare 1995).
- Knight-Bruce, G.W.H.,
Memories of Mashonaland, (New York 1895).
- Lan, D.,
Guns and Rain, Guerrillas & Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe, (London 1985).
- Loter, C.,
Rhodesian Soldier And Others Who Fought, (London 1984).
- Mangold, T. and Goldberg, J.,
Plague Wars, The Terrifying Reality of Biological Warfare, (New York 2000).
- Martin, D. and Johnson, P.,
The Struggle for Zimbabwe, The Second Chimurenga, (Harare 1981).
- Martinez, I.,
Rhodesian Anthrax: The Use of Bacteriological and Chemical Agents During the Liberation War of 1965-1980, *Ind. Int'l & Comp. L. Rev.* 13., (2002), p. 447-479.
- Maxwell, D.,
Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe, A Social history of the Hwesa People, c. 1870-1990, (Edinburgh 1999).
- Melson, C.,
Top Secret War: Rhodesian Special Operations, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 16.1, (2005), p. 57-82.
- Moorcraft, P.,
The Rhodesian War: A Military History, (Barnsley 2009).
African Nemesis, War and Revolution in Southern Africa 1945-2010, (Exeter 2010).

- Moore, R.,
Rhodesia, (New York 1977).
- Mutambara, A.,
The Rebel In Me, A ZANLA Guerrilla Commander in the Rhodesian Bush War. 1974-1980, (London 2014).
- Mutanda, D.,
The Rhodesian Air Force in Zimbabwe's War of Liberation, 1966-1980, (Jefferson 2017).
- Nass, M.,
"Anthrax Epizootic in Zimbabwe, 1978-1980: Due to Deliberate spread?", *Physicians for Social Responsibility Quarterly* 2, (1992), p. 198-209.
- Nyagumbo, M.,
With The People, An Autobiography from the Zimbabwe Struggle, (London 1980).
- Parker, J.,
Assignment Selous Scouts, Inside Story of a Rhodesian Special Branch Officer, (Alberton 2006).
- Pike, D.,
My Part in the Downfall, (Cape Town 2009).
- Pittaway, J.,
Selous Scouts, The Men Speak, (Avondale 2017).
- Purkitt, H. and Burgess, S.,
South-Africa's Weapons of Mass Destruction, (Bloomington 2004).
- Ranger, T. and Nicolini, B. ed.,
Studies in Witchcraft, War and Peace in Africa, (New York 2006).
- Rappert, B. And Gould, C.,
Dis-Eases of Secrecy, Tracing History, Memory and Justice, (Auckland Park 2017).
- Reed, D.,
The Battle for Rhodesia, (Cape Town 1966).
- Russel, J.,
Rhodesian Bush War, (Oxford 2013).
- Sachikonye, L.,
When a State Turns on its Citizens, Institutionalized Violence and Political Culture, (South Africa 2011).
- Sithole, M.,
Zimbabwe Struggles within the Struggle, (Harare 1999).
- Soref, H. and Greig, I.,
The Puppeteers, An examination of those organizations and bodies concerned with the elimination of the white man in Africa, (Harare)

- Stannard, D.,
Interview 24 October 2008.
- Stiff, P.,
See You In November, Rhodesia's No-holds-barred Intelligence War, (Cape 1987).
- Taylor, J.,
A Whisper in the Reeds, 'The Terrible Ones': South Africa's 32 Battalion at War,
(Warwickshire 2013).
- Tekere, E., Mandaza, I. ed.,
A Lifetime of Struggle, (Harare 2007).
- TRC,
"The State Outside South-Africa between 1960-1990", *Truth and Reconciliation Final Report*.
- Tse-Tung, M., Griffith, S. translation,
On Guerrilla Warfare, (Illinois 2000).
- Tungamirai, J., Bhebe N., ed. and Ranger, T., ed.,
Recruitment to ZANLA: Building up a War Machine, in: *Soldiers in Zimbabwe's Liberation War*, (Harare 1996).
- Winter, G.,
Inside Boss, South Africa's Secret Police, An Ex-Spy's Dramatic and Shocking Exposé, (New York 1981)
- White, L.,
Precarious Conditions: A Note on Counter-Insurgency in Africa after 1945, *Gender and History*, Vol. 16.3 (2004), p. 603-625.
Poisoned Food, Poisoned Uniforms, and Anthrax: Or, How Guerillas Die in War, *Osiris*, 2nd Series, Vol. 19, Landscapes and Exposure: Knowledge and Illness in Modern Environments (2004), p. 220-233.
- Wilkinson, A.,
Insurgency in Rhodesia, 1957-1973: An Account and Assessment, (London 1973).