

Shifting sands of Zimbabwe's history

There is no one history. **Sabelo J Ndlovu-Gatsheni** looks at interpretations of Zimbabwe's national liberation struggle and how they have been used and abused by the ruling party. He then asks some questions around these different versions of his country's history.

In an article 'Defending our heritage: armed struggle should serve as guiding spirit in *The Herald* 16 February 2002, Dr Godfrey Chikowore argued that: "Zimbabwe is the product of a bitter and protracted armed struggle. That armed struggle should serve as the guiding spirit through the presidential elections and even beyond. The right to choose a president of one's own choice should not be considered as a mere exercise of a democratic right. It is the advancement of a historical mission of liberating Zimbabwe from the clutches of neo-colonialism. Any other wild illusion about it constitutes a classic example of self-betrayal and self-condemnation to the ranks of perpetual servitude. The stampede for democracy should not undermine the gains of the liberation war."

This contrasts with what Morgan Tsvangirai said in 2000 after the launch of the Movement for

Democratic Change (MDC): "In many ways, we are moving from the nationalist paradigm to politics grounded in civil society and social movements. MDC politics are not nationalist-inspired, because they focus more on empowerment and participation of the people. Zanu's nationalist thinking has always been top-down, centralised, always trapped in a time-warp. Nationalism was an end in itself instead of a means to an end. One of Zanu's constant claims is that everyone in Zimbabwe owes the nationalist movement our freedom. It has therefore also become a nationalism based on patronage and cronyism."

The 15-year national liberation struggle which culminated in the birth of Zimbabwe in 1980 has become the foundation myth of the nation. Political legitimacy has been based on the role people played in the liberation war. Those without liberation war credentials are excluded from power.

SELECTIVE MEMORIES

No wonder, then, that many of those who participated in the liberation struggle found it useful to write autobiographies and biographies which were painstaking efforts to claim power, legitimacy and support. Joshua Nkomo, a leading Zimbabwean nationalist who campaigned in 1980 as 'Father Zimbabwe', lost the elections to Robert Mugabe and had to endure 10 years of persecution and attempts on his life on Mugabe's orders. While in exile in London in 1983, Nkomo wrote in *Nkomo: The Story of My Life*: "This is not a history – one day, if I am spared, I may contribute to the writing of one with a happy ending. Instead it is the personal record of a life that played a part in history, and it is also the work of an active politician who wishes to see things change for the better in the lives of the ordinary people in his country. I have been called 'Father Zimbabwe.' Whether I deserve that title is not for me to say. But by a dozen years in prison and half as many in exile, I believe I have earned the right to speak for freedom while it is still endangered – this time not by far-off colonial rulers, nor by settler population who will, I hope, now play their full part as citizens of a new nation, but by former colleagues in the liberation."

Perhaps the most controversial recent autobiography is *Edgar '2Boy' Zivanai Tekere: A Lifetime of Struggle*, by the maverick nationalist politician Edgar Tekere. In this, Mugabe's liberation

credentials are consistently demolished. According to Tekere, Mugabe continued to live the life of a middle-class civil servant amidst a ferocious war. He remembers that: "I taught him how to handle weapons... Yes, up to that time, he had not learned how to use weapons... Mugabe was by now the Commander-in-Chief of the Zanla forces, yet he had no uniform."

The many autobiographies and biographies of major actors show a complex picture of the national liberation struggle as a theatre of competing regimes of truth. These include rival versions of events, claims of valour and accusations of cowardice and prevarication, of the role of ethnic formations in the competition for power and the suspicions and fears of betrayal among key players. They also highlight the competing justification for political decisions, accounts of interference by host governments, accusations and counter-accusations of betrayal, and attempts by different actors to delegitimise and sideline each other. The narratives also contain many silences and revelations of assassination plots and intrigue.

When Tekere's book was published, Robert Mugabe castigated it, stating that "the machinery is not biographies; the people who vote us are the ordinary people of Zimbabwe!" He clearly saw a mere book as a threat to his power. Nkomo's role is itself the subject of warring interpretations. Tekere described him as: "... a heavy political burden ... Although he was part of the Patriotic Front delegation, everyone knew that he had held secret meetings with Ian Smith at State House in Lusaka, as well as attending the Victoria Falls Conference... Many of the

concessions we made at Lancaster House were because Nkomo had agreed to them."

But Nkomo's book sets out to correct the view of him created by Zanu-PF politicians bent on subverting his nationalist credentials since 1963, when Zanu (Zimbabwe African National Union) broke away from Zapu (Zimbabwe African People's Union). During and after the struggle, Zanu claimed to have inaugurated armed resistance when its first group of guerrillas fought a heroic battle at Sinoia in 1966. But Nkomo writes that he sourced the first weapons in Egypt in 1962.

Jeremy Brickhill and Dumiso Dabengwa have argued that the military strategy of Zapu and its armed wing, Zipra (Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army), was more sophisticated than that of Zanu and Zanla (Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army), whose strategy was based on conventional warfare which would climax in a 'zero hour' in which the colonial forces were defeated. In the Zanu-PF narrative, the combined Zipra-Umkhonto we Sizwe military engagements with the Rhodesian forces in Wankie in 1967-1968 are not mentioned at all.

The narratives of both Zanu and Zapu are silent on nationalist formations that agreed to the internal settlement of 1978, which culminated in the short-lived 'Zimbabwe-Rhodesia' government led by Bishop Abel Muzorewa. Both Zapu and Zanu joined forces in a Patriotic Front in 1976 and assumed the title of authentic liberators while depicting other formations as sell-outs, reactionaries and counter-revolutionaries.

Inevitably, political autobiographies are written from a defensive position in which the

central actor justifies almost all of his or her political decisions and activities. They are of interest because of the divergent interpretations of crucial events, forcing historians to read between the lines. The problem is one of selective memory.

HISTORY SERVING NATIONALISM

As the foundation myth of Zimbabwe, the national liberation struggle has attracted much writing, from the resistance history of the 1960s, through the celebratory and triumphal histories of the 1980s, to the current critical interrogations and the 'patriotic' histories at the turn of the 2000 millennium.

Terence Ranger's important books, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia* and *The African Voice in Rhodesia* laid the foundation for nationalist history by forging casual connections between the first resistance to colonialism and the mass nationalist politics of the 1960s. Ranger became a leading voice in what he described as "history in the service of nationalism", as opposed to "histories of nationalism", in which he combined interrogations of peasant consciousness, histories of religion, ethnicity, landscape and violence.

The victor's narrative still holds sway. With the radicalisation of the Zimbabwe state at the beginning of the new millennium, official history came back with a bang to occupy television and radio in Zimbabwe. The ruling nationalist elite, Zanu-PF, took practical steps on the story of the liberation struggle by establishing a National Youth Service Programme and introducing a compulsory course in all teachers' and technical colleges called National Strategic Studies.



This was stuck on a wall of a public building in Harare. "I liked it because Zanu-PF is always reminding citizens of the liberation struggle including youth forced into National Service Training Centres where they had to imbibe Zanu's liberation history". (Ndlovu-Gatsheni)

Zimbabwean history was once again taken over by the nationalist elite and war veterans, and simplistically repackaged in terms of successive *chimurengas* (war of resistance). Mugabe declared that: "Measures will be taken to ensure that the history of Zimbabwe is rewritten and accurately told and recorded in order to reflect events leading to the country's nationhood and sovereignty. Furthermore, Zimbabwean history as a subject will be made compulsory up to form four."

This was part of the beginning of what Ranger terms 'patriotic' history. Sikhumbuzo Ndiweni, Zanu-PF's information and publicity secretary for Bulawayo, openly stated that what was taught in universities and colleges as history was suspect, as these institutions had turned themselves into 'anti-government mentality factories'. As centres of learning, tertiary institutions had indeed made efforts to transcend nationalist history. Students were beginning to engage in a post-nationalist examination of the past.

The state media propped up 'patriotic history' with a flood of

'nativist histories' whose main producers were not professional historians but war veterans and academics with uncertain agendas. These became a daily spectacle on national television in the programme *National Ethos*. Topics included cultural norms and traditional forms of governance. Zimbabwean birth was emphasised as the sole marker of citizenship. Migrants or settlers or *vauyi* as they were popularly known had no rights in Zimbabwe.

The history of national liberation has become a fragmented field: insider versus outsider, participant versus non-participant, nationalist versus non-nationalist. Works are marked by a generational divide, gender divide, ideological divisions, biographical and autobiographical approaches, actor-based approaches, great-man approaches, case-study approaches, revisionist approaches, personal memoirs and many others.

HISTORIES OMIT CRUCIAL QUESTIONS

But they leave pivotal questions unanswered.

Who are 'the people' who need liberation, and from what? This sounds simple, but it is crucial in post-colonial societies where liberation struggle is seen as ending with the black middle classes' assumption of state power. At what point can one say 'the people' have been liberated?

Who are 'the people's' enemies? The triumphant nationalists continue to reduce the people's enemy to minority settlers and the colonial state. This is a racial definition. What about the conflict between capital and labour? Workers have been sidelined as a force of transformation and the black middle-class elevated as the new force for change. Why this

shift in the concept of 'the people'?

Zimbabwean nationalism has commandist tendencies. How can it be authoritarian and emancipatory at the same time? What is the relationship between the national question and the democratic question within this nationalism?

African nationalists have toyed with many visions of liberation. Some, bourgeois-inspired, have dreamt of racial equality and one man, one vote as the solution to colonial and apartheid problems. Others were inspired by Marcus Garvey's slogan 'Africa for the Africans', imagining a 'native republic' populated only by blacks, with whites swept into the sea. Yet others have been fired by the Russian and Chinese revolutions, envisioning socialist republics throughout Africa. Finally, traditionalists have dreamt of the reconstitution of pre-colonial African societies and a return to African roots.

At the root of Zimbabwe's crisis is the failure of the nationalist elite to harmonise the national and democratic questions. This was well put by Tsvangirai in *The Guardian* of April 7 this year: "But democracy is an orphan in Zimbabwe. Since the infamous unilateral declaration of independence in 1965 made by the white government of Ian Smith in what was then Rhodesia in an effort to block the extension of suffrage to the country's black majority – the cry of democracy has been ignored. Mugabe's 28-year rule has similarly undermined the development of institutional democracy." LB

Sabelo J Ndlovu-Gatsheni is a lecturer in African Studies at The Ferguson Centre for African and Asian Studies at The Open University, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom. He can be contacted at s.ndlovu@open.ac.uk