


BOOK REVIEW

Military Instrumentality in Rhodesia and Zimbabwe

Black Soldiers in the Rhodesian Army: Colonialism, Professionalism, and Race

By M. T. Howard. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. Pp. xvi+282. \$110.00, hardcover (ISBN: 9781009348447).

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M. T. Howard's examination of Black soldiers in the Rhodesian African Rifles (RAR) marks a significant advance in studies of indigenous military labor in colonial states. Until recently, studies of armed conflicts in contemporary Africa have focused on nationalist guerillas prosecuting protracted insurgencies for majority rule. Colonial loyalists, in turn, are generally defined as irregular militias rather than professional soldiers.¹ Scholarship on Zimbabwe's freedom struggle concentrates on liberation fighters while taking full cognizance of tensions and divisions between different nationalist movements. Attempts at further nuancing liberation-centric histories have been complicated by polemical neo-Rhodesian narratives which depict a thin white line of courageous warriors attempting to stem an oncoming communist tide. Luise White's recent analysis of Rhodesian war memoirs discusses Black soldiers.² Yet, her monograph primarily focuses on intertextual arguments between white writers comparing the combat performance of different field units. Howard, by contrast, foregrounds the experiences and recollections of elite African soldiers fighting in a protracted guerilla war.

Most of the literature on colonial soldiers and police forces have linked indigenous loyalty to the fabrication of martial races "naturally" inclined to bear arms. Howard effectively demonstrates that this orthodoxy does not apply to the RAR. Its soldiers did not fight for patriotism, tribe, or religion. Drawing on interviews with former combatants and theories from military sociology, Howard attributes RAR loyalism to their regiment's institutional culture. This regiment stood apart from most other Black and white units in the Rhodesian army. Made up of volunteers and largely officered by whites from rural areas with knowledge of indigenous languages, the RAR fielded some 4,000 soldiers by war's end, providing over 80 percent of the Rhodesian army's full-time regulars. As the war escalated and white emigration accelerated, Rhodesian military officials became increasingly dependent on Black military labor. Racist regulations were consequently curbed, if not entirely dismantled. Thus, Howard suggests, RAR men were products of a professional, rather than racial, culture.

Howard views RAR culture as operating on micro and macro-levels. At a micro-level, volunteers recruited into the ranks underwent intensive military training, thus acquiring the professional

¹David M. Anderson and Daniel Branch, "Allies at the End of Empire-Loyalists, Nationalists and the Cold War, 1945-76," *The International History Review* 39, no. 1 (2017): 1–13.

²Luise White, *Fighting and Writing: The Rhodesian Army at War and Postwar* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

skills necessary to conduct aggressive combat operations. Accurate marksmanship, tracking abilities, and paratrooper qualifications made country lads into elite troopers that eventually outperformed highly regarded all-white units. According to Howard, RAR commanders instilled a sense of professional commitment to provide competent service. Failure in the field resulted in ostracism from peers and personal shame. Threats of dishonor proved far more effective at preventing poor performance than formal disciplinary measures. In addition, exposure to mortal danger on the battlefield compelled soldiers to rely on each other for survival. This created sub-unit camaraderie, further reinforced by subsequent clashes. On a macro-level, RAR troops embraced the invented traditions and historic achievements of their regiment. Smart uniforms, marching parades, and military accoutrements instilled a sense of regimental pride that superseded ethnolinguistic and regional origins. Both chiShona and isiNdebele-speakers readily entered the regiment. Recruits did not receive favorable treatment based on their language or place of origin. Following British military traditions, the regiment itself became a tribe, one any recruit could join provided he passed its initiation rituals, adhered to its standards, and served faithfully.³ Pride, rather than punishment, compelled Black soldiers to fight.⁴

To be sure, material rewards played a considerable role in cementing Black loyalty. Higher pay, improved living conditions, free schooling for soldiers' children, and eventual admission into commissioned ranks provided RAR troopers with middle class lifestyles. Howard contends that RAR men viewed the army as a total institution that existed apart from a wider racist society. Military exigencies blunted white supremacist ideologies and resulted in far better material conditions than those found in civilian life. This is a fascinating argument based on interviews with veterans who fought in an elite, and relatively privileged, armed formation. Only further research will bear out the applicability of this argument for other Black Rhodesian units. For Howard, it is no surprise that many veterans waxed nostalgically over their pre-1980 lives after Zimbabwe's precipitous post-2000 economic decline.⁵

Howard's most insightful contribution is his discussion on the political utility of professional soldiers. The development of professional army units did not lead to the consolidation of apolitical militaries in Rhodesia and Zimbabwe. Rather, political parties utilized RAR military skills to pursue partisan objectives. Ironically, this military instrumentality was enabled by repeated RAR attestations to apolitical professionalism. Moreover, apolitical declarations professing loyalty to the government of the day were themselves political acts. RAR troops experienced mounting hostility from African communities and liberation forces as guerilla bands penetrated and occupied Rhodesian territory. Guerilla cadres frequently targeted off-duty RAR troops for assassination while nationalist leaders branded them as traitors and sell-outs. Black servicemen countered that they were in fact regular soldiers, who were duty-bound to serve their government, without questioning its political policies, however morally reprehensible they may be. Furthermore, RAR units viewed themselves as far more professional than the guerilla cadres that wantonly brutalized civilians and refused to engage government forces in conventional combat. This can be viewed as little more than rationalizing collaboration, but Howard contends the RAR commitment to professional standards was genuine. In any case, the RAR managed to project itself as the acceptable face of the Rhodesian army by war's end in 1979 and was rapidly incorporated into the Zimbabwe National Army. Tellingly, instead of

³On this point, Howard takes inspiration from, Michelle R. Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014).

⁴For contrasting examples of African soldiers compelled to fight to avoid severe physical abuse by their white officers see, Lennart Bolliger, *Apartheid's Black Soldiers: Un-national Wars and Militaries in Southern Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2021). I have described Black soldiers in certain South African military units as bondsmen rather than mercenaries in, Mesrob Vartavarian, "Black Soldiers of the Apartheid State: Pawns, Agents, Neither or Both?" *Journal of Southern African Studies* 48, no. 5 (2022), 943–944.

⁵Other examples of African nostalgia have been explored in, Jacob Dlamini, *Native Nostalgia* (Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2009) and Charles Piot, *Nostalgia for the Future: West Africa after the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

making “apolitical” RAR units the core of a professional military, Zimbabwe’s ZANU(PF) government deployed them to consolidate single-party dominance of state institutions. The RAR played a decisive role in crushing 1981’s Entumbane mutiny, thus tightening ZANU(PF)’s grip on power and facilitating further politicization of Zimbabwe’s armed forces. As is often the case, apolitical professionals served politicized ends.