Commitment Problems and the Tragedy of the Rhodesian Bush War

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The Rhodesian Bush War, or the Zimbabwe Liberation Struggle, was a civil war that lasted from July 1964 until December 1979 (Kriger 2019, 244-262). The civil war pitted the white-minority-led Rhodesian incumbents against two rebel groups: the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU). The rebels launched sporadic guerrilla attacks with the hope of achieving black-majority rule (Kriger 2019, 242). In this paper, I seek to explain why the white-minority incumbents, outnumbered 22-to-1 in the Rhodesian population and in the face of intense international pressure, chose to descend into a fifteen-year-long civil war instead of compromising on black representation (Sebenius et al. 2016, 1). In explaining this conflict, I dispel two common explanations for the Rhodesian Bush War: (1) that the war was an all versus all conflict inspired by ethnic hatreds and (2) that the war was simply fought by recruited non ideological and unorganized thugs and criminals. Instead, the Rhodesian Bush War can best be explained as a rational bargaining failure, in which the white minority government and the ZANU/ZAPU rebels faced a credible commitment problem. Understanding the conflict under this lens offers important policy implications. As a commitment problem, Britain could have stepped in as a third-party guarantor for negotiations and prevented 15 years of violent intergroup warfare.

Literature Review

One prominent school of scholarship on the Rhodesian Bush War argues that the war was driven by widely-shared ethnic hatreds. In this perspective, the only way to understand the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) and the subsequent outbreak of war is through the lens of identity conflict. On November 11th, 1965, the Rhodesian Cabinet declared the country as independent and sovereign from Britain colonial rule, because the UN and England pushed for ethnic power-sharing in Rhodesia (Watts 2012, 1). The Rhodesian Front (RF) "was so obsessed with this fear [of black government] that it allowed it to dictate its course of action… It mobilized all its resources and energy and time to make it impossible for a black government to emerge" (Mungazi 1981, 41). Authors in this tradition of ethnic hatred scholarship point to political rhetoric as evidence of a "religious" zeal for white supremacy (Mungazi 1981, 44). For example, Clifford Dupont, President of Rhodesia at the time of UDI, famously proclaimed, "I call on all Rhodesians who wish to see this African domination prevented to unite and fight. We have a war to win a war of survival." ("Rhodesia's Drive to Independence" 1973, 70) Similarly, widely-distributed black nationalist literature at the time wrote, "All whites must be killed. We are to free Zimbabwe with bloodshed. Zimbabwe is for blacks, and not for whites… Kill Smith and his running dogs"(Mungazi 1981, 95). Thus, both sides viewed the conflict as a war of ethnic survival (Bowman, 150). Finally, the hypothesis that commonly-shared ethnic

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hatred drove the Rhodesian Bush War is supported by the 1965 election of Ian Smith. Smith campaigned for Prime Minister of Rhodesia on an extremist, white supremacist platform vehemently against black government. Smith offered no opportunity of compromise or interethnic power-sharing. Smith defeated David Butler, the candidate from the moderate Rhodesia Party (RP), who favored an end to racial discrimination in Rhodesia (Novak 2013, 41). Smith's party, the Rhodesian Front (RF), swept all fifty white Parliament seats in the 1965 election against RP, signaling that the majority of whites shared Smith's bigotry (Leys 1960, 119). Based on this school of literature, the electorate favored extremism because of deep-seated, intergroup ethnic hatred.

        A second school of scholarship argues that the Rhodesian Bush War was not driven by generations of society-wide, pent up ethnic hatred. Instead, the violent conflict was carried out by a small band of opportunistic marauders, who were recruited and guided by political leaders (Anti-Apartheid Movement 1979, 17-46; Gann and Henriksen 1981). They simply viewed ethnicity as an ordering device, not a crucial motivating factor. This scholarship falls under the tradition of John Mueller. In the piece "The Banality of 'Ethnic War,'" Mueller posits that the whole concept of all versus all "ethnic warfare" is fallacious (Mueller 2000, 42-70). Instead, "Recruited and encouraged by leading politicians, and operating under a general framework of order provided by the army, a group of well-armed thugs—or skinhead or redneck or soccer hooligan or Hell's Angels types—would emerge in an area where former civil order had ceased to exist or where the police actually or effectively were in alliance with them"(Mueller 2000, 53). In Rhodesia, the white infantry has been characterized as the "rugby-playing, beer-drinking kind," not a far cry from the soccer hooligans of Mueller's description (Gann and Henriksen 1981, 33). Scholars within this tradition point to the high rates of recruitment for the urban unemployed to join the Security Forces (Beckett and Pimlott 1985, 173-175). Pay was on average about 50% higher in the security forces than for standard labor in Rhodesia (Hoffman et al. 1991, 12). Even black Africans joined the Rhodesian Security Forces for the salary. Many unemployed black Africans were recruited into plainclothes Crime Prevention Units (CPUs) in which they were armed by the RF and "operate[d] in the townships as unsupervised gangs of thugs" (Anti-Apartheid Movement 1979, 17). Finally, the Rhodesian Security Forces recruited criminal foreign mercenaries, who became particularly notorious in units such as the Selous Scouts and Grey's Scouts, "where lack of supervision and disciplinary control gives ample scope for individual 'initiative' and indiscriminate brutality"(Anti-Apartheid Movement 1979, 42). Cross-racial recruitment indicates that militia men were not motivated by ethnic hatred. Instead, regardless of ethnicity or country of origin, politicians recruited and motivated sadistic thugs and criminals to carry out their political aims.

ARGUMENT

Despite the intuition to point to racism as the motivating factor, ethnic-based explanations are insufficient to explain the incidence of civil war in Rhodesia. These ex-

planations speak little of actual opportunities for groups to rebel. Rhodesia had been subjected to white minority rule for decades before the outbreak of civil war. In 1891, Rhodesia came under administration of the British South African Company (BSAC) and thousands of white settlers poured into the region.[xix] The white colonists declared a self-governing colony and maintained political and material domination over the African population for the next 70 years. In the 1923 Constitution of Rhodesia, the white-minority government wrote prohibitions against fraternization into the statutes (Tsigo and Ndawana 2019, 92) . Furthermore, they enacted a voting requirement of "an income of £100 per annum or occupied property or buildings worth £150 or owned a mining claim" (Keppel-Jones 1983, 176, 315-6). This disenfranchised many black Africans. Further, as an act of intentional material deprivation, the 1930 Land Apportionment Act divided land between white and non-white Rhodesians (Mutiti 1974, 259-278); the white settlers legally claimed ownership of the most fertile and mineral-rich land (Tsigo and Ndawana 2019, 92). The black majority was relegated to the outskirts of society and deprived of basic legal rights. However, undermining the hypothesis that ethnic hatreds drove the Rhodesian Bush War, the rebel groups did not resort to violent guerrilla attacks until the 1960s.

The second school of literature, in which thugs and criminals are motivated by political entrepreneurs, is also insufficient to explain the causes of the Rhodesian Bush War. This hypothesis fails to capture how well-trained, organized, and ideologically-motivated both the rebel groups and the Rhodesian Security Forces were. First, the ZANU and ZAPU rebels benefited from training, uniforms, and weapons from Cold War communist countries (Hoffman et al. 1991, 6-7). For example, to spread their ideology and control, the Chinese established training camps in neighboring African countries for the ZANU militants, such as Itumbi in Southern Tanzania (Johnson 2015). Eight Chinese instructors worked at Itumbi, including Comrade Li, the infantry expert; they evolved ZANU insurgent strategy towards a "Maoist's People's War" (Johnson 2015). The Chinese instructors integrated the basic teachings of Mao Tse-tung's On Guerilla Warfare, including maintaining the support of the population while building up military capabilities. The rebel groups were motivated by nationalist sentiments and trained on strategic guerrilla warfare. Similarly, the Rhodesian Security Forces were organized beyond the shallow motivations and framework of the thugs and criminals hypothesis. Smith's regime maintained a highly coordinated mix of air and ground forces, including helicopters and dakotas (Arbuckle 1979, 27). The RF distributed Joint Operations Commands (JOCs) throughout the country (Hoffman et al. 1991, 6-7), which centralized and synchronized the efforts of the five separate entities responsible for Rhodesian defense, including the police, the Special Branch, the Army, the Air Force, and the Internal Affairs Department (Hoffman et al. 1991, 13). The armed services met daily throughout the war to determine tactical operation decisions through a process of consensus (Hoffman et al. 1991, 14). With a cohesive security force, they could effectively adapt to threats from rebel insurgents. For example, in response to prevalent and highly dangerous landmines placed along key roads

by ZANU rebels, the Rhodesian security forces innovated their vehicles. They filled their tires with water and air, and mounted special V-shaped capsules on chassis to dissipate the explosions. These measures reduced mine-related casualties by 90% and injuries by 20% (Johnson 2015). The Rhodesian Security Forces were intelligent and organized enough to innovate and collaborate on strategies. Thus, they were much harder to combat than simple criminals.

Instead of deep-seated ethnic hatreds or sadistic thugs and criminals, the Rhodesian Bush War can better be understood through a more unitarily rational explanation of war. The white minority government and the ZANU and ZAPU rebels descended into extremely costly warfare because they faced a commitment problem. Commitment problems occur when actors agree on relative capabilities and can identify a compromise by which they would be willing to avoid warfare (Arbuckle 1979, 27). However, the groups are unable to compromise because they do not trust the other side to carry out the agreement. In Rhodesia, politically institutionalized power-sharing would have been mutually preferable to war. About 20,000 people died in the conflict, including roughly 10,000 guerrillas and 1,361 Rhodesian security force members (Moorcraft and McLaughlin 2008, 417). Had they compromised sooner, black Africans could have increased representation, and the Smith regime could have retained some political power without these dramatic costs. However, white Rhodesians distrusted compromise with Africans because they anticipated a power shift. Just 270,000 whites ruled over six million blacks (Sebenius et al. 2016, 1). Additionally, the black population was growing. In 1960, the population ratio of white to black was 1:16 (Brownwell 2008, 54). At the outbreak of the war in 1965, the disparity had grown to 1:20. By the end of the war in 1979, the population ratio was 1:28. These population disparities can better explain statements by white politicians of an "all-or-nothing" "war of survival." The conflict was not inherently a war of survival because of primordial ethnic hatred. Instead, Smith and his white-minority government framed the conflict as a war of survival because they feared permanent political exclusion if the black majority seized political power (Brownwell 2008, 55). In Rhodesia, the mutually preferable bargain of constitutional power-sharing was unattainable because of an anticipated power shift in favor of black Rhodesians.

Additionally, because of a history of exploitation, the African nationalists were unlikely to trust any promises of the Rhodesian government; they, too, faced a credible commitment problem, as they expected the white minority to renege on any concessions. The African nationalists first revived under Joshua Nkomo and the Southern Rhodesian African National Congress (ANC) in 1957 (Hull 1976, 149). The Southern Rhodesian ANC attempted to play a role in the Central African Federation, which "was heralded as a bold attempt to forge a multi-racial nation out of the British protectorates" (Hull 1976, 149). These attempts at multiracialism in the Rhodesian government were supported by Southern Rhodesia's liberal Prime Minister Garfield Todd. However, Todd was forced out of his office by his Cabinet in February 1958, as his cabinet feared he was moving too close to majority rule (Hull 1976, 149).

Soon after, the ANC was banned in Southern Rhodesia. In 1961, Shona nationalists reorganized under the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) (Hull 1976, 149-151). Again, this political group was banned on September 20th, 1962. Thus, any attempts to forge cooperation or political autonomy were crushed by the white minority. Despite being outlawed, these early groups represent coordinated political action beyond the scope of opportunistic marauders. Additionally, the groups' frequent attempts at ethnic power-sharing undermine the hypothesis that the Rhodesian Bush War was caused by widespread ethnic hatred. Instead, facing a history of exploitation, arrest, and disenfranchisement, the ZANU/ZAPU groups confronted a commitment problem and were unlikely to trust the white Rhodesians to uphold any agreements.

The credible commitment problem of the ZANU/ZAPU nationalists and the Rhodesian government manifested itself in two key moments: (1) the 1961 Constitutional Conference and (2) the 1962 election. These two watershed events provide important micro case studies for analyzing the cause of the Rhodesian Bush War, because these developments contributed most significantly to the outbreak of war.

The 1961 Rhodesian Constitutional Conference process represents the first important manifestation of the enduring commitment problem. Leading up to the 1961 Constitutional process, the majority government, Edgar Whitehead's United Federal Party (UFP) made some multi-racial concessions, indicating a reasonable effort to create a cooperative settlement (Brownell 2010, 473). Most notably, amendments to the Industrial Conciliation Act allowed multi-racial trade unions and the partial repeal of the Land Apportionment Act (LAA) (Brownell 2010, 473-475). Thus, Africans were playing an increasingly active role in Rhodesian national affairs. This indicates that the white Rhodesian government was not motivated by primordial ethnic hatred, as the prior hypothesis supposes. Instead, many politicians and Rhodesian officials viewed progressive concessions as an effective means of combating growing African nationalism (Msindo 2007, 274). Despite these concessions, the UFP assured its constituency that it would not lower voting qualifications. Instead, the 1961 Constitution cemented two rolls: A-roll for those with higher voting qualifications (white Rhodesians) and B-roll for those with lower voting qualifications (black Rhodesians) (Good 2015, 40). Eligibility for A-roll required an income of 792 pounds per annum and the possession of immovable property worth 1650 pounds (Mutiti 1974, 266-267). Eligibility for B-roll required an income of 264 pounds per annum and the possession of immovable property worth 275 pounds (Mutiti 1974, 267-268). Fifty members of Parliament were elected from the A-roll and only fifteen were elected from the B-roll. Black Rhodesians who were historically materially deprived by the Land Apportionment Act (LAA) were largely relegated to the B-roll (Mutiti 1974, 268). The 1961 Constitution failed to build confidence in the different groups that their rights and interests would be safeguarded, thus representing a credible commitment problem. The Constitution did not address the discriminatory laws and high property requirements for one to qualify to vote (Mutiti 1974, 268-269). Black Africans were unable to trust that the Rhodesian government would not renege

on their meager concessions, so they chose a more radical course of action. At the last meeting of Congress before the convention, Joshua Nkomo and the NDP promised a bloody revolution until universal suffrage was realized (Hull 1976, 187). The 1961 Constitution was a notable opportunity to achieve power-sharing; instead, because of credible commitment problems, it set forth the progression toward civil war.

The Constitution and its conservative power-sharing agreement were viewed as direct attacks on the survival of black Rhodesia. Thus, as a second crux of commitment problems, the African nationalists protested the 1962 elections. They put up no black candidates for election, called upon all Africans to refuse registration, and encouraged those who were already registered not to vote (Barber 1967, 462). This call to boycott had a huge impact on electoral turnout. No more than one-fifth of those entitled to a B-roll vote had registered; of those, only one-fourth had cast ballots. In 1962, only 91,913 Africans voted in the B-roll—a turnout rate of just 2.6% (Lemon 1978, 512-514). Such a coordinated effort of collective political protest represents deeper political motivations than unorganized thugs and criminals. Black Rhodesians desired rights to just representation in government, much more than the simple desire to loot and pillage. Meager B-roll turnout rates in the 1962 election reflect broader commitment problems; even when black Rhodesians were given some increased electoral power, they did not trust that they could enter into power sharing agreements with the white minority controlling government.

In addition to black Rhodesians protesting the election, the white electorate became increasingly conservative in the 1962 election. This extremism was likely due to credible commitment problems induced by anticipated power shifts under the new Constitution. Growing extremism became evident in the 1962 election, which brought the white supremacist Rhodesian Front (RF) to power. The RF won 35 of 50 A-roll seats in Parliament over the more moderate United Federal Party (UFP), who had pushed for multi-racial concessions at the Constitutional Conference the year prior (Lemon 1978, 41). According to RF leader Ian Smith, in response to the interethnic concessions of the 1961 Constitution, many white Rhodesians felt "that the hour had come and if they did not arouse themselves they were going to lose their country altogether" (Olsson 2011, 37). Thus, an increasing portion of the electorate came to oppose integration and viewed violent struggle as the only means of political preservation (Olsson 2011, 19).

The 1962 election of the RF is notable in the progression towards civil war, as the party pushed the country towards greater division and extremism. By 1965, the RF swept all 50 A-roll seats and declared independence from Britain (Brownwell 2008, 476-478). The first engagement of the Rhodesian Bush War, the Battle of Sinoia, took place just five months after UDI; seven ZANLA insurgents and two civilians were killed in the fight against the Rhodesian Security Forces (Binda 2008, 48-50). Earlier attempts at power-sharing and political cooperation were ineffective because of credible commitment problems. After these commitment problems manifested themselves at (1) the 1961 Constitutional Conference and (2) the 1962 election

protest, the descent towards civil war became almost inevitable.

IMPLICATIONS

The understanding of the Rhodesian Bush War as the result of credible commitment problems has important policy implications. The outbreak of war could have been mitigated by a third-party security guarantee (Walter 2002, 26-27). Third-party intervention is an important solution to the prevention of civil wars, in which a trusted foreign supporter can act as a guarantor to enforce cooperation between groups and ensure that cheating on the alliance would be costly. In the study of all civil wars between 1940 and 1990, Barbara Walter determined that if a third-party agrees to enforce the terms of a peace treaty, negotiations always succeed regardless of ethnic divisions (Water 1997, 335). Without a credible third-party security guarantee, the combatants' vulnerability during demobilization remains dangerously high and often allows conflicts to ignite.

In the example of Rhodesia, Britain had both the reason and capabilities to enforce cooperation and power-sharing agreements between white Rhodesians and black nationalists. Anglo-Rhodesian negotiations were attempted four times between 1966 and the end of the war in 1979. Every attempt to negotiate failed except for the Lancaster House Accords, which ended the Rhodesian Bush War on December 21st, 1979 (Walter 2002, 140-141). The Lancaster House Accords were successful because Britain vowed direct military and political involvement; Britain promised to commit peacekeepers, cease-fire observers, and election monitors on the ground to carry out the negotiated settlement (Walter 2002, 113-114).

This eventual assurance of Britain as an enforcer of negotiations could have been accomplished before the outbreak of 15 years of war. Britain had significant reason to intervene before the announcement of UDI and the outbreak of violence in Rhodesia. Beginning in early 1962, various organs of the United Nations passed resolutions calling upon Britain inter alia to convene a new constitutional conference for Rhodesia and solidify majority rule (Good 2015, 43). Even in April 1965, just seven months before Rhodesia's UDI, the UN Security Council passed a resolution calling on Britain "to employ all necessary means, including the use of military force" to stop Ian Smith's illegal UDI (Mungazi 1981, 62-63). These resolutions show that the international community knew UDI was a real and present risk; thus, with earlier intervention, the Rhodesian Bush War was an avertable tragedy. The most notable opportunity to intervene was after the 1961 Constitutional process. Joshua Nkomo, the first president of the NDP, warned Britain at the last Congress before the Constitutional Conference, "There are only three methods possible —negotiations, economic breakdown or bloody revolution. I warn Britain that if she does not act now I will quit the present nature of politics that we have been following" (Mungazi 1981, 67). By not placing boots on the ground during negotiations, the British signaled to Ian Smith and his regime that they were not committed to protecting the rights of black Rhodesians (Good 2015, 45). Thus, without a third party guarantor, the white-minority

government was further empowered to consolidate power.

Using the Lancaster Accords as an example, an effective third-party security guarantee would involve direct military intervention from Britain. At the time, the military budget of Britain was 400 times that of Rhodesia, so intervention should not have been too costly to the colonial power (Good 2015, 57). Initial military intervention would involve a coup de main, or a sudden air invasion involving a few companies of paratroopers (Good 2015, 58). Troop estimates for a mission like this range from three brigade groups up to two divisions. Thus, it would take approximately 15,000 to 25,000 men to secure Rhodesia (Good 2015, 58). These troops could be supplemented by the United Nations. However, with a land force of 317,000 in 1960-61, maximum estimates of Commonwealth troop presence would only be ~8% of the British army (Commons 1961, 636). After disarming the country, Rhodesia could be effectively monitored by peacemakers while a political treaty was enacted, including the implementation of fair and equal elections for black Africans (Walter 2002, 140-141). Proper prescription is necessary to the prevention of civil war. By diagnosing the commitment problems plaguing negotiations in Rhodesia, Britain could have acted as a trusted enforcer. Thus, the Rhodesian Bush War was an entirely avertable tragedy.

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