

Rhodesia's Gulags: Oral Histories of Imprisonment, Detention, and Confinement During Zimbabwe's Liberation Struggle, 1960–1980

Introduction

Between 1960 and 1979, Zimbabwean African nationalists engaged in a protracted guerrilla war that ultimately ended white colonial rule in Rhodesia. The settler regime responded by imprisoning a large number of African political activists and other persons suspected of being aligned with the guerrillas. This collection of life narratives involves the experiences of Zimbabwe's liberation-struggle-era political prisoners and detainees who were incarcerated in Rhodesia's main prisons and detention centres, such as Gwelo Prison, Salisbury Prison, Chikurubi Maximum Security Prison, Khami Maximum Security Prison, and the Gonakudzingwa, Sikombela, and Wha Wha detention centres. The social composition of the men and women included in these narratives was quite diverse. These political prisoners and detainees ranged from peasant men and women whom the Rhodesian forces mostly accused of harboring and collaborating with 'terrorists', to young urban political activists accused of sabotage activities, to educated professionals accused of recruiting the youth to join the liberation war as guerrillas, to nationalist leaders, and including even captured combatants themselves.

Although the stories of these men and women are different and reflect different imprisonment and detention experiences, there are dominant themes in these narratives. In the first place, ex-political prisoners' and detainees' oral testimonies challenge the common tropes of the Zimbabwean liberation war, especially those that confine the liberation struggle to guerrilla war zones and rural areas. Although prisons were spaces of confinement, these testimonies show that prisons were also terrains of struggle. By describing the Rhodesian prison as a terrain of struggle, I mean that the prison was doubly a space of repression and subversion, and that political prisoners were capable of challenging and negotiating their incarceration. Listening to ex-detainees' experiences, for example, reveals the violence of the colonial state and the various methods of torture used on inmates. But these testimonies also reveal the ways in which prisoners were not simply victims of state-sponsored terror, but that they were capable of challenging and negotiating their incarceration. For example, prisoners tell stories of how they smuggled documents and letters in and out of prison, planned and executed prison breaks, fought back against violent prison warders, befriended black prison guards in order to mitigate harsh prison conditions, and educated themselves through prison classes organised by other political prisoners, among other things. In other words, these oral testimonies give agency to these historical subjects. In addition, most informants in this collection of interviews clearly articulate how their penal experiences were part of the broader struggles against colonial rule, and how they defined their incarceration as some form of

'fighting for national freedom'. Furthermore, most informants eagerly told their stories as part of their effort to both challenge the postcolonial political elite's monopolisation of liberation war history, and to insert their experiences into Zimbabwe's liberation struggle history.

Another important theme in these narratives is the social effects of incarceration during (and after) the liberation struggle. Listening to the stories of these men and women, it is clear that one of the single most concern for detainees and prisoners was the social effects of their incarceration both on their immediate families and on other dependants whom they could no longer look after. Their testimonies reveal that the effects of detention and imprisonment were felt not only behind but beyond bars as well, and that the most affected were women and children left behind by incarcerated husbands, fathers, and sons. Given the highly gendered nature of political imprisonment, men outnumbered women in the prisons. Most of these men were the sole income-earners for their families, which was consistent with the gendered nature of colonial employment and career opportunities. What this meant, therefore, was that once the sole income-earner was incarcerated, and given the long jail terms meted out to most political detainees, the family and dependants left behind faced certain destitution and poverty. Most informants, therefore, lament the destruction of their social lives that incarceration brought: others lost their wives due to divorce, some lost touch with important close relatives, and most had their careers and forms of livelihoods ruined for life.

Overall, these stories add to the multiplicity of historical subjects who contributed to the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe. Like other groups of people who contributed to the struggle for liberation in Zimbabwe, these testimonies demonstrate that political hostages of the Rhodesian regime played a crucial role towards dislodging colonial rule both as producers of powerful critiques of the colonial regime from inside the prison confines and as symbols of African resistance.

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