Uprooting the weeds: Power, ethnicity and violence in the Matabeleland conflict.

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Chapter One

The Matabeleland Conflict: An Introduction

This study is about power. Power to rule, power to change the course of a certain development, and power to by violent means attempt to affect peoples' political choices. The historical moment is the 1980s in the newly independent Zimbabwe, specifically focusing on Matabeleland.

Today Zimbabwe is in a deep economic and political crisis. After 20 years of Zanu(PF) rule under Robert Mugabe, political power and its' legitimate use is debated, questioned and contested. Just how fundamentally the ruling party’s power base is under pressure became apparent in the recent national elections (June 2000), when the nine month old opposition party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) received 57 out of the 120 parliament seats. Although the elections were a loss for the opposition, the vote demonstrated a shift in the electorates' political allegiance as Zanu (PF) lost its overwhelming dominance in Parliament for the first time since 1980.

Intense political activity, mobilisation, as well as violence preceded the national elections. The ruling party placed the land issue as a central question in the election campaign, and according to government discourse white landowners are an impediment to a democratic re-distribution of land. Subsequently, they must give up their land to others who need it more. To press home this message so called 'war-veterans' began in the election run-up to occupy farms, harass and kill farm workers and landowners. However, the message did not only include the land issue. Under this first layer of argumentation a second layer was evident: neither landowners nor the labourers of the land were welcome to have a political opinion different than that of the government. Thus, beyond the land issue the question of governance and leadership under democratic rule was clearly at stake. Thugs spread in the rural areas in many parts of the country, asking to see Zanu (PF) membership cards, and instilled through violence the need to vote Zanu(PF) in the elections. Government opposition, assumed or real, was punished, silenced and

1 Zanu (PF): Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front).
2 Of the remaining seats Zanu (PF) received 62, and Zanu-N (lead by Ndabaningi Sithole) secured one seat. In total the parliament has 150 seats. The 30 seats not contested in the elections are earmarked as follows: 12 seats for representatives nominated by the president; 10 seats for traditional chiefs; and 8 seats for provincial governors (Mugabe vann, 2000).
sometimes eradicated. State authorities such as the army and the police, failed to intervene to stop the violence, whilst power was used in an attempt to affect people's political choices. Despite the political intimidation and violence the electorate demonstrated a choice not necessarily affected by the government's pressure, subsequently allowing for President Mugabe to rule only with a narrow majority in Parliament (Vald och terror, 2000).

For actors and observers alike it is obvious that a pattern is currently being repeated: power is used as a means to ensure that a certain ruling group remains in the position of authority, using violence. Where do patterns of this kind emerge from? What lies in the historical experience that brings forth actions of this nature? How can we understand political developments in Zimbabwe today? The topic of this study is not today's 'land' conflict, it is the Matabeleland conflict of 1980–1987. However, as this study attempts to illuminate, the Matabeleland conflict was the result of a historical continuum played out in the political dynamics of the day. Similarly, the political tensions of today can be closely linked to historical experiences such as the Matabeleland conflict, and the subsequent political culture currently prominent. Understanding events in a historical continuum is central to the analysis in this study, where developments are seen as a process and placed in the country's own historical context. Events continuously take place and add to the huge weave of political development and human experience. No thread can be pulled out or be explained illegitimate. One can only attempt to trace the threads and try to distinguish the complex patterns that history produces. This is what this work is aiming to do: map out the Matabeleland conflict in a context of institutional change and fluctuating political positionings seen in a historical context. Having done so, some patterns of political behaviour and context specific dynamics are crystallised, which then may be a foundation for the understanding of new events. Thus, having insight into the Matabeleland conflict may hopefully give a wider scope of understanding to where Zimbabwe stands politically today, placing repeated patterns in a historical spectrum.

Following a short synthesis of the Matabeleland conflict, a review of selected literature is presented. This is followed by a debate on the theoretical frameworks used, a presentation of main findings, and finally how the research outcome is generalised.


In the new independent state of Zimbabwe, 1980 marked the ending of fifteen years of civil war between the black majority and the governing white minority. In their fight for independence from British colonial rule, the black majority was split
into two forces; Zanu (PF) and PF-Zapu, and their respective military wings Zanla and Zipra.\(^3\) Having together (with common aims and goals) but separately (in different organisations) brought independence to the country, the two parties continued to operate after independence. In the 1980 general elections Zanu(PF) won an overwhelming victory, and PF-Zapu became a minority party in a coalition government with Zanu (PF).

At the time a great amount of enthusiasm for the future was the most obvious general expression, politically enveloped by the policy of reconciliation. However, tension lingered. Independence would bring change which included hope for some and uncertainty for others. For the black majority changes meant aspirations and prospects for a better standard of life with all its different components, and for the white minority changes stood for (perceived) loss of security and privileges. The tension which later took shape in military confrontations and took Zimbabwe frightfully near a new civil war, did however not come from the white minority camp where observers feared it would originate. Instead it arose from political competition and lack of confidence between the two parties Zanu (PF) and PF-Zapu, and was most urgently felt in the military wings amongst the ex-combatants. The armed clashes with additional related incidents, set off Zimbabwe’s post-independence history in a direction which would directly affect the country’s political, economic and military situation for the coming seven years. It would culminate in, what the government called the ‘anti-dissident campaign’, or what others named ‘ethnic cleansing’. Here the dissident activities and the army intervention are termed ‘the Matabeleland conflict’.\(^4\)

During 1980–1983 the three contesting armies, Zanla, Zipra and the Rhodesian Security Forces, were amalgamated to form a new national army with a common

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PF-Zapu: Patriotic Front-Zimbabwe African People’s Union. Zipra: Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army, Zapu’s military wing. The addendum of PF to both party names is a remnant from 1979 when the two parties negotiated as a Patriotic Front at the Lancaster House Conference. Although the unity only lasted as long as the Conference, the abbreviation remained in use until the actual merger in 1987. For details on the Patriotic Front, see Dabengwa 1995:34-35.

\(^4\) The question of defining a term to describe the dissident activities and the army intervention in Matabeleland and Midlands has been a controversial issue. In the media and the literature, what transpired is termed differently according to who describes it. Examples are: civil war, dissident dilemma, anti-dissident campaign, ethnic cleansing, tribal extermination and genocide. Choosing in this study to term what occurred as ‘the Matabeleland conflict’, is an attempt to avoid connotations. Although the geographical are of Midlands is not included in this phrase, activities in Midlands are inclusive in the term.
loyalty and single allegiance. Initially the three forces were located in separate camps, where the processes of demobilisation and conversion of guerrillas into conventional soldiers took place. The mistrust between Zanu(PF) and PF-Zapu was not a sentiment created in isolation by this particular historical moment, it was an old feeling taking on new dimensions in the integration process. Since 1963 when former Zapu members formed Zanu, the two parties with similar political programs remained rivals. Although the two parties were national in character, one of the elements of difference between the two was ethnic support and identification. Zapu, led by Mr. Nkomo, was to a great extent supported by the Ndebele group of people (17 percent of the population), and that Zanu led by Mr. Mugabe, had the backing mainly of the Shona group of people (77 percent of the population) (Berens 1988:3).

Due to historical reasons linked to both political and ethnic concerns, the army integration process was a volatile procedure and two armed confrontations did take place between the Zanla and Zipra forces. At the end of 1980 Zanla and Zipra troops were transferred from their assembly points to housing schemes near Harare and Bulawayo, in which the two forces came to be located next to each other. Tension due to unsettled pre-independence differences flared and resulted in violence (Alao 1995:109). Two clashes, in 1980 and 1981 respectively, left 222 soldiers killed and hundreds wounded (Auret 1992:132). Concurrently with these incidents reports of unofficial stockpiling of arms by the guerrilla armies circulated. Government forces located many arms caches, but others went undiscovered. In 1982 a stockpile of arms was unearthed on PF-Zapu property after which the government concluded that PF-Zapu was planning a military coup. This led to the dismissal of Mr. Nkomo and three of his colleagues from the coalition government. In addition, two key persons in the Zipra leadership, Dumiso Dabengwa and Lookout Masuku, were arrested, and PF-Zapu property was confiscated.

These events provoked large-scale defections of former Zipra officers and combatants from the assembly points (Auret 1992:147, Alao 1995:109). The defected soldiers, named ‘dissidents’ by the government, returned to their home area Matabeleland North and South. For the ruling party’s project of national unity and its position of hegemony, the dissidents were perceived as a threat. The dissidents themselves, however, experienced their desertion as necessary to avoid political and ethnic persecution, and to emphasise their stance they resorted to acts of destruction and violence.

In addition to the former Zipra combatants, two other groups of ‘dissidents’ acted in Matabeleland. These were firstly, bandits who took the opportunity to commit
crimes for personal gains in the name of the dissidents. Secondly, a small number of infiltrated South African trained recruits, named ‘Super Zapu’ by the Zimbabweans (Hanlon 1986:178). These three groups of dissidents were being tracked by the Fifth Brigade, consisting of 7000 elite soldiers politically and militarily trained by North Koreans. To motivate such a comprehensive military operation, the Matabeleland conflict was given extensive propagandistic media coverage with the dissidents being portrayed as a cohesive group, vast in numbers and political/ethnic enemies of the state. The Fifth Brigade’s task, capturing dissidents and their sympathisers, was translated into harsh operations perceived as ethnic persecution by many victims. In government discourse the operations were justified by the threat to national unity and security the dissidents were perceived to pose. However, on an operational level, military activity was geared toward the elimination of Zapu structures executed through army counter-insurgency operations. The crisis was further complicated by the external involvement of South African government. Some of the dissidents having political grievances such as the pace of the land reform, were considered an excellent breeding ground for South African influence and control. However, the attempt to infiltrate so-called Super-Zapu elements failed (Hanlon 1986:181). Nevertheless, for the Zimbabwean government the external security threat allowed an additional justification for a heavy security and military response. A State of Emergency was renewed, and for the following three years major curfew and search operations took place in Matabeleland. The deployment of the Fifth Brigade in Matabeleland, resulted in a military intervention in which thousands of Ndebele people were abducted, tortured, raped and killed.

The Matabeleland conflict came to a conclusion in 1987 when Zanu (PF) and PF-Zapu signed a Unity Accord, and the two parties merged under the name Zanu(PF). Once the document was signed and the merger made public, violence ceased. An amnesty for the dissidents was declared, and a pardon was given to atrocities-convicted army personnel. Politically Zimbabwe was on route to a one-party state, a goal which Zanu (PF) had had in its program since the 1977 party congress in Mozambique.

2. Review of Selected Literature

During the period between late 1980 and the end of 1987 very little information was available to the Zimbabwean public regarding what in actual fact was happening in Matabeleland and Midlands. During the worst violence, reporters or outside civilians were not allowed to enter the crisis areas in Matabeleland North and South. When a government enquiry did take place, its results were not made
public (Auret 1992:156). Local press and media controlled by the government, offered a one-sided view of what did and had occurred. Subsequently, at the time, an in-depth analysis was difficult to make due to lack of reliable data as well as the extreme political sensitivity surrounding the issue.

After the 1987 Unity Accord the general political atmosphere shifted, as Zanu and Zapu merged. However, seven years of heavy political and security pressure and the frail unity between the historical party opponents, did not grant any surfacing of data. The Matabeleland conflict remained too sensitive and painful to touch. Yet in general the political space began to widen, although not without resistance from the government and the ruling party. In the late 1980s student demonstrations against government corruption encouraged and initiated other organisations in civil society to act on their stands and beliefs. Most opposition was met with heavy criticism from the government and its ruling party, and in some cases (such as the student demonstrations) with state violence (Sachikonye 1995:147–152). In the late 1980s the widened political space was not yet considerable enough to safely publicise information on the fierce activities leading up to the signature of the Unity Accord.


Gradually in the 1990s information regarding the government’s actions during the Matabeleland started circulating locally, mainly in the independent press. At first scattered clippings appeared mentioning the (above) human rights reports, as well as accounts by relatives of missing people protesting about undisclosed disappearances of civilians in Matabeleland. However, it was not until the 1992 discovery of mass graves in a number of mine shafts in Matabeleland and Midlands that a fierce media debate ignited (Kunene 1992; Tragedy at, 1992; Ndlovu 1992; Moyo 1992; Ncube 1992; Latham 1992; Human Remains, 1992; Makamure 1992). Survivors claimed that the human remains were victims of the Fifth Brigade massacres, who allegedly had after torture been put alive in 50kg corn sacks and thrown into the disused mines (Kunene 1992). Following the mine exposure, reports on human remains linked to army atrocities throughout the Matabeleland province began to be filed (Grisly discovery, 1992; More Bodies, 1992; Mambo 1993).
the debate following these reports, the government's stand remained un-rocked. It admitted innocent people had been killed in the Matabeleland conflict, but as in any war situation no compensation could be granted to the relatives of the victims (Latham 1992). Furthermore, the probing of the Fifth Brigade atrocities was 'irresponsible in the name of reconciliation' according to the then Minister of Defence, Moven Mahachi (Moyo 1992). This view was echoed in articles where the revealers of the mass graves where accused of 'tribalism' and 'regionalism' (Playing the, 1992; Dr. Jonathan, 1992). Although the independent press did publish information about the Matabeleland conflict and a (media) debate occurred, the disclosure did not have a fundamental impact on government legitimacy. President Mugabe rode the storm losing neither face nor power.

Social science literature inclusive of the Matabeleland conflict began to appear in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The years of violence in Matabeleland, characterised by many as far more traumatic than any experience in the liberation war (Werbner 1991:155,166–167), are covered in the literature, albeit in a limited manner (Herbst 1990, Stoneman 1988, Mandaza 1991, Mungazi 1992, Sachikonye 1995). The issue of the conflict is often presented mainly as a 'rift' between the two parties and the years of political and military terror are downplayed. The ethnic component is omitted or mentioned as a minor historical fringe factor (Banana 1989, Shamuyarira 1989, Mnangagwa 1989, Chiwewe 1989).

The single most important text regarding the violence taking place in Matabeleland and Midlands during the 1980s is a report by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace and the Legal Resources Foundation entitled 'Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace: A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands 1980–1988' (March 1997)⁵. In this detailed report, consisting of background, case studies and recommendations, atrocities of the Matabeleland conflict are systematically disclosed. Expected to bring uproar in the country and forcing president Mugabe to address the dark past, the report caused international alarm and national debate. However, after the dust had settled, Mugabe's power position remained unaffected. The content of the report is nevertheless invaluable as a documentation particularly of how the state military machinery at the time conducted low intensity warfare in the three provinces⁶. The report being an ambitious project with a compilation of pain stainkenly given and collected narratives and files, it does however lack placement of the conflict in a wider perspective, both historical-

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⁵ After a period of controversy over its availability to the public, the report was published by the Mail and Guardian on the Internet in May 1997 (Nkiwane 1998:97).

⁶ Matabeleland North, South, and Midlands Provinces.
ly and in the wider political context at the time. Not being part of the report’s objectives, lacking a broader view causes nevertheless the conflict description to be left in a vacuum, and omits a historical understanding of how ethnic concerns became central in the conflict.

The most recent description of dissident activity and the Fifth Brigade intervention is given in Alexander/McGregor/Ranger (2000), as part of a history description of the Shangani Reserve covering a time span of one hundred years. An important contribution of this text is the civilian perspective and how the conflict in the 1980s affected the work of local councils in the area. However, being a detailed study of a particular area, the chapters on dissident and military activity in the 1980s give only a partial picture of the Matabeleland conflict as a whole. Furthermore, the description neglects the crucial component of government discourse, and its effect on the conflict both locally and nationally. Another decisive component not analysed is the active role of ethnicity in the conflict, although the authors conclude that ‘many Zimbabweans’ saw the conflict in terms of ‘tribalism’, and ‘as the inevitable result of deep rooted animosities between the Shona and the Ndebele’ (Alexander et al, 2000:9). Thus, in the context of the authors’ ambitious study of a remote region which has been relatively neglected in the country’s history annals, the described conflict of the 1980s constitutes an important continuum. However, from the perspective of the Matabeleland conflict, the description has limitations in that the crucial impact of the government’s national policy and discourse interventions are scarcely mentioned, and that the role of ethnicity as a central phenomenon in the conflict, is not examined.

Subsequently, to date a gap exists in the literature with regard to a detailed examination of the Matabeleland conflict. Despite a number of publications regarding this time period, no comprehensive study of the conflict, examining it from a historical perspective and addressing power and ethnicity as interdependent factors in the past and the present, has been published. This study is an attempt to partly fill this gap, and to crystallise issues pertinent for the further understanding of today’s power relations in Zimbabwe. This is done in several ways. Firstly, the empirical chapter consists of a detailed mapping of events, from the demilitarisation phase (December 1979) to the signature of the Zanu-Zapu Unity Accord (December 1987). Certain events are central to this lengthy description, for example the de-

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7 Hereafter identified as Alexander et al.
8 This area comprises of Nkayi and Lupane districts, Matabeleland North.
9 See chapter three, pp. 241-242.
tailed review of the events surrounding the recovered war material stockpiled on Zapu property, based on High Court records. Another crucial part is the description of the Fifth Brigade, including training, strategy, decision-makings, operations, and ethnic stance, much based on primary sources hitherto not published. Secondly, the study attempts to grasp events as they dialectically evolved through analysing developments by various actors in an interrelated fashion. Thus, government interventions, divided into military, policy, and discourse interventions, are examined in conjuncture to ongoing dissident activities and ex-Zipra dissident perspectives of the conflict. To this is added a description of the ongoing Zanu-Zapu discourse exchange and civilian perspectives of the conflict. Finally, this study attempts to contribute to the understanding of the Matabeleland conflict through allowing actors to express themselves through including ‘Voices’ after each historical section in the empirical chapter, allowing for the vast number of positionings and perceptions of the conflict come to the fore. Thus, by combining an examination of actors’ perceptions and policies, actions and reactions, the study attempts to give a more comprehensive picture of what occurred in the Matabeleland conflict. The empirical material is subsequently analysed based on a historical perspective, relating developments to the pre-independence context of Shona-Ndebele relations, the colonial mode of local and central rule, the development of nationalist organisations, the liberation war, and Zanu-Zapu power competition at different historical moments. Through this exercise, power relations at pre- and post-independence can be crystallised, including ethnic identity, allowing for a more in-depth understanding of the emergence and development of the Matabeleland conflict.

3. Research Methodology

The research methodology used for data collection for this study has to a great extent been influenced by the political sensitivity of the topic, and the subsequent scarcity of available documentation. Extensive time was allocated to examining news media and any other available information which related to political power competition between Zanu and Zapu during 1980–1987. Important documentation has been court records and the accessibility to Zapu files through a Zapu members’ private collection. However, as material on the conflict was scarce, collection of primary data became crucial for the study.

10 Collection of Zimbabwean primary and secondary data took place 1990–1994, during the author’s residence in the country.
The method of collecting primary data was based on in-depth interviews, and shorter ‘fact-collection’ interviews. The interviews were divided into three areas: 1) persons affiliated with the pre-independence political mode of thinking; 2) actors and organisations in the then current Zimbabwean political culture; and 3) individuals and organisations having experience or association with the Matabeleland conflict.

The research regarding pre-independence mode of political thinking took place through conducting a number of in-depth case studies of actors with a role within a group. The interviews were focused on perceptions of historical accounts, political values and fundamental beliefs, foci of identification and loyalty, and political knowledge and expectations. Regarding actors and organisations representing the political culture of the 1990s, three methods were used: field studies where a sample of representatives of interest and political organisations were interviewed; case studies, sampling single actors with influential positions or other leverage; and collection of secondary data.

Finally, attempting to interview actors which had first hand experience of or were associated with the Matabeleland conflict, proved to be difficult, as the conflict was a sensitive issue to research. However, through organisations such as the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP), ZimRights, Bulawayo Legal Projects Centre, and the local NGO ‘Zimbabwe Project’ sources and interviewees were located, and fieldwork in Bulawayo and Tsholotsho district, (Matabeleland North) were organised. This included visits to the two ex-Zipra dissident co-operatives Green Light and Sebantubanye. Interviewing people turned out be an experience in facing hostility, disappointment, and great pain. Government and Zanu(PF) representatives where in general reluctant to discuss the topic, or were negative to the research, and sometimes aggressive. Ex-Zipra dissidents shared their experiences without much reluctance, but often with the added emphasis of their disappointment as to their current status. At the other end of the spectrum, the responses by victims and others affected by the conflict, varied. Many were scared or uncomfortable with a tape recorder, others seemingly relieved to express what they had experienced, and some were determined to share their information to make the atrocities known.

Due to the sensitivity of the topic, it was not possible to pre-design methods, establish numbers of samples and select a specific number of institutions or interviewees. Instead, the scope of the primary material collected was based, in each singu-

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11 Having become dissidents, the ex-Zipra dissidents lost their right to demobilisation money. The ex-Zipra dissidents were also promised government support after the Unity Accord and the declaration of Amnesty, however this promise was not honoured. For details, see chapter three, pp. 268.
lar case, on the rapport established with the interviewee. Through different channels, particularly in co-operation with the above mentioned organisations, interviews were conducted with a variety of persons, such as journalists, lawyers, clergy, politicians, academics, military, NGO workers, former dissidents, and local peasants in the affected rural areas.

4. History and Empirical Chapters

How developments in Matabeleland evolved 1980–1987 is contested, and numerous interpretations of events exist. The description of the conflict offered above is one interpretation of events. Each actor carries his or her ‘truth’, giving events a meaning appropriate for that person’s particular experience, and subsequently describes events differently. The notion that there are a vast number of interpretations of the Matabeleland conflict, – why it occurred, how it developed, and the political and military choices made, – is central to this study. The fact that the perceived meaning of the conflict differs, is of interest as actors’ perceptions laid the basis for their decision-making. Thus, the discrepancy in views and interpretations came to have a crucial impact on the way in which the Matabeleland conflict developed. To capture and crystallise perceptions of difference, views and interpretations are analytically grouped into two collections: firstly, perceptions tied to a Shona and Ndebele dichotomy, and secondly, perceptions linked to Zanu-Zapu power competition. The foundation for this analytical distinction is made in the historical chapter, and follows in the empirical chapter where the Matabeleland conflict is described in detail.

The objective of the history chapter is to trace developments in the Rhodesian history facilitating an understanding of the emergence and evolution of the Matabeleland conflict. In order to do so the description goes back to the pre-colonial period, describing Shona and Ndebele communities. Colonial penetration had a significant impact on social and political relations, and is therefore brought to the fore. The emphasis of the chapter is however on the period of nationalist politics (1957–1979), as the Matabeleland conflict is closely linked to the two nationalist parties Zapu and Zanu and their interrelationship. The period of nationalist politics include a narrative of the liberation war 1965–1979, which is of great importance for an analysis of post war politics in Zimbabwe. Perceptions of difference and the Shona-Ndebele dichotomy are traceable to the pre-colonial period, and coincide later in historical development with the cleavage of political power competition between Zanu and Zapu. Arriving at the historical moment where Zanu and Zapu operate simultaneously the focus is on differences perceived internally and those induced by external forces. The narrative also includes views that the
two nationalist parties had of themselves and each other, both in terms of ethnicity and as two political forces. Moreover, perceptions on ethnicity and politics held by settlers, the minority government, and its security forces are also noted. It is concluded that a content rich mixture of security disinformation, political propaganda and ideology, ethnic identification, religious beliefs, and social values and traditions, amalgamated and created perceptions of power and ethnicity. The historical chapter closes with the long civil war coming to an end and independence being a reality. Zanu and Zapu prepared for new political developments, however, unity between the two as a Patriotic Front derailed. Instead Zanu-Zapu power competition switched into a higher gear in the wake of an open measure of political allegiance – the country’s first-ever general elections.

In the empirical chapter, one of the primary objectives is to record main conflict events over the time period 1980–1987. What has often been labelled the ‘dissident dilemma’ or ‘Matabeleland disturbances’ are here placed in a wider political and historical context. By linking political occurrences, perceptions, and government strategy, the scope of the conflict is expanded, allowing for a more complex picture to emerge. The chapter includes a detailed account of events leading up to former Zipra guerrilla’s defection from the national army and the formation of ‘dissident’ groups, and the subsequent increase in military activity culminating in the deployment of the Fifth Brigade. The chapter attempts to contribute by outlining the three dissident groups and positionings within them, as well as by gaining insight into government activity and strategy during the conflict. Regarding government activity, an analytical distinction is made between military, policy and discourse interventions, so as to crystallise government intention. The chapter further describes a shift in government military strategy before the 1985 general elections, the politics of unity negotiations, the subsequent Unity Accord in 1987, and the amnesty granted for dissidents.

Besides recording events, another objective of the empirical chapter is to bring out different perceptions of the Matabeleland conflict. This is attempted through the insertion of ‘Voices’ after each descriptive section of the chapter, and consists of actors in their own words perceiving, explaining, remembering, and stating what the events discussed meant personally, in their view, or to Zimbabwe at large. The purpose of highlighting peoples’ interpretation as the conflict developed, is to show how perceptions influenced the course of the conflict. Subsequently, the ‘Voices’ constitute an important part for the arguments presented in the chapter.

The central argument put forward in the empirical chapter is that the ruling party Zanu (PF) pursued a position of hegemony with the ambition to legislate for a one-
party state. It is argued that a consistent pattern of opposition party (Zapu/Zipra) persecution developed soon after independence in 1980, leading to defections from the national army. Defected ex-Zipra soldiers established the core of the largest dissident group, counteracting persecution by violent means. It is put forward that ex-Zipra destabilisation was an opportunity which Zanu(PF) took (and partly created) as a tool for manipulation in their pursuit to immobilise Zapu, the opposition party being a political threat to a one-party state. Subsequently, it is argued that dissident destabilisation was a side event of the conflict, although presented as the main cause of the Matabeleland conflict. With dissident activity as a justification, military operations took place 1980–1987 in order to eradicate political opposition. It is noted that the Matabeleland civilians, subjected to extreme state violence (particularly by the Fifth Brigade) due to political and ethnic identity, carried ultimately the cost of the ruling party’s quest for hegemony. Subordinating state administration and national interests to that of party politics, it is argued that the government manipulated with public opinion to create consent for its actions.

5. Theoretical Framework

The Matabeleland conflict was a complex conflict with many actors involved. There is no one outstanding explanation as to why the conflict emerged, or an evident answer as to why it developed in such a violent way. Actors had a diversity of objectives and goals, and reacted to developments as they took place, carrying events forward in a dialectical manner. In this fluid process of actions and reactions three themes were continuously present and inter-linked: power, ethnicity and violence. To gain insight into the background and the development of the conflict, the concluding chapter attempts to examine the themes and their interrelationship. Overarching the above themes is the study’s reoccurring notion of perceptions of difference. Actors attached meaning to developments. Meaning was constructed through memory, socialisation and personal predisposition, thus fusing complex patterns of reactions to historical contradictions, played out against contemporary events. Conceptualising the conflict in this way, the theoretical tools required cover related history of power relations, ethnicity and violence, and explanatory mechanisms of perceptions particularly those of memory.

To analyse the background of the Matabeleland conflict, pre-independence power relations are examined using Mamdani’s research (1996) on the legacy of late colonialism in Africa. In this theoretical framework attention is on the mode of domination, mapping out locations and manifestations of power. Applying Mamdani’s framework to the Rhodesian experience, an essential finding for the study is how
power and ethnicity from the start of colonial penetration, became interconnected. Governance of the rural areas was equal to control of natives, in a framework in which ethnic identity and separation was dynamically enforced politically. Resisting colonial rule resulted in a struggle in which ethnicity was the starting point, and violence was inherently part of the understanding of the governance and the method of solution. Thus, perceptions of differentiation fostered through the colonial experience, were linked to tribal belonging and its definition in power and governance.

Mamdani’s framework is understood as being focused on power relations looking at the institutional framework. Key for understanding the analytical usage of Mamdani’s framework in this way is the dichotomy of rulers and ruled as mirrored from the colonial period, and the methods of control involved. Hence, the study takes a long-term perspective on the cementsation of power-relations, noting the role of structures in relation to power. However, structures comprise only one part of power relations. Perceptions, values and beliefs constitute another component. To examine perceptions, consciousness, and memory additional tools are needed. Synthesising theories related to perceptions, a mental framework is defined, focusing on memory as a device in the socialisation process and the moulding of perceptions. The main conclusion applying theories used under the umbrella of the ‘mental framework’ is that the colonial differentiation process, intrinsically encompassing all social relations, inescapably became part of actors’ understanding of the world, internalised into an unconscious level of functioning, conditioning perceptions and collective memory. Combining the ‘institutional’ and ‘mental’ frameworks gives insight into how perceptions of governance and rule may have formed. Africans were ruled locally by way of central direction, therefore, following Mamdani’s understanding, conformity to rule took place on two levels: conformity to racial ruling (centrally) and tribal ruling (locally). However, ninety years of colonial oppression did not only cause conformity. Memory and socialisation caused values of the rulers to internalise. Using fragmentation and differentiation as a tool, colonial rulers were able to enforce the historical dichotomy between the Shona and Ndebele groups of people. Over time internalisation of difference cemented. Thus, a conclusion put forward is that in the Rhodesian experience memory of institutional structures of rule over time and actors conformity to rule over time, formed actors’ perceptions in relation to race, ethnicity and violence. Conformity to racial and tribal ruling had the content of internalised ethnic difference. Thus, perceptions of governance and rule formed over time carried the content of fragmentation and differentiation inherently.
Consequently, the theoretical section concludes by noting that the crucial points for analysis of the Matabeleland conflict is firstly, the conceptual understanding of power relations, the reality under which people functioned. Secondly, the link or relation to power relations made through memory work and socialisation, often unconscious or non-conceptualised, but nevertheless present in perceptions. Lastly, the fact that perceptions are the basis for decision-making and actions taken. Thus, the analysis of the Matabeleland conflict begins with the dual understanding of colonial power relations: one institutional framework and one mental framework. Both which as minimal communal starting point have that the Matabeleland conflict could not have taken place without the historical baggage of colonial power relations, and particularly that of ethnic fragmentation and differentiation.

6. Analysis and Findings

The concluding chapter consists of an analysis of the empirical material using the institutional and mental frameworks, focusing on Zipra dissident activity, military intervention by the Fifth Brigade, government discourse, and the unity process. An important foundation for all findings in the analysis is the conclusion that in the newly independent Zimbabwe the way in which power was structurally organised had not considerably changed. Centrally and locally power was executed much as in the late colonial period, although there were government ambitions for transition. What was crucially different, as compared to pre-independence, was however the power relations between the two main actors, Zanu and Zapu. Whilst ex-Zipra dissidents and Matabeleland civilians were treated as the former colonial ‘subjects’, in accordance to Mamdani’s conceptualisation, the ruling party Zanu was acting as the ‘citizens’ of yesterday’s colonial rule. Thus, whilst power relations had changed, perceptions of power had not changed. The new rulers took partly on the mental framework from their predecessors, reproducing colonial power relations. Hence, the change of circumstances shifted power relations, whilst operating perceptions were closely linked to previous social relations and identity. History repeated both in terms of mirroring patterns of absolute rule, but also in terms of response to those patterns.

A central discussion in the section regarding ex-Zipra dissidents is the role of ‘tribalism’. Noting that Zanu and Zapu were parties in political power competition, and that each party had followers divided to a great extent based on ethnic identity, does however not explain why ethnic concerns became central in the conflict. The discussion dissects the difference of ‘tribalism’ conceptualised as an effect of colonialism as opposed to tribalism being an inherent component of the same. Concluding
that the latter is applicable to the Rhodesian experience and subsequently the conflict, the discussion turns to the functioning of tribalism as a policy and the behavioural affects of denial and blame it caused in both pre- and post-independent Zimbabwe.

The actions of the Fifth Brigade have brought horror and disbelief to those affected as well as to observers. Analysing the Brigade with the two mentioned frameworks, it is evident that both in terms of actions and perceptions the Brigade reproduced historical experience. Despite the formation of a Zimbabwean Army (ZNA) which was to be non-political, the Fifth Brigade reverted into the liberation war mode both in terms of orientation and method. Assuming that dissidents operated interchangeably as civilians/guerrillas and that dissidents were supported by local Zapu structures, pinpointed the Ndebele civilians as justified army targets. Furthermore, the Fifth Brigade had another objective; to politically reorient ‘undesirable ideas’ among the Matabeleland civilians and demand loyalty to the ruling Zanu(PF). These military and political missions were enveloped by the Brigade’s ethnic stance. A conclusion made is that the Fifth Brigade was driven by an internal ethnic coherence, legitimising its acts of violence through historical events – ‘settling old scores’. Added to this historical component, the Brigade’s operational attitude was connected to ethnicity through the enemy identification given in the army and the ethnic mobilisation carried out by the government. Therefore it is noted that both Brigade members and those giving army orders, carried the institutional and mental frameworks into the conflict. Thus, the Fifth Brigade’s arrival at simply turning ‘ethnic’, as put by its Commander, can be seen as a complex process of past and present operating simultaneously, in the context of war resulting in a crude and unsophisticated formula of ethnic violence. Matabeleland subsequently became an arena in which historical experiences were released, relived and reformatted for current use.

The analysis goes on to ask how the public responded to the ongoing horrors. Examining government discourse and propaganda, the conclusion is that the public could only have a limited reaction, as it was denied vital information regarding the conflict. A blanket censorship rested over massacres, executions and rapes, instead a partisan narrative disseminating values of the government was broadcast. Suppression, simplification, distortion and context displacement were methods used in the attempt to manage and mould public opinion, in order to mobilise bias and manufacture consent for a government specific purpose. It is noted that one standpoint was particularly emphasised, that which stipulated that government military intervention was legitimate, and the use of violence on civilians was justified.
The signature of the Unity Accord brought the conflict to an end, but before this historical settlement lengthy negotiations had taken place. Although the merger being a matter between two parties, the unity process is analysed as a government intervention in the Matabeleland conflict. The discussion brings forth Zanu’s and Zapu’s separate but related power interests: examining why both parties chose to keep the government coalition intact, and underlying reasons for the party merger to take place.

7. Lessons from the Matabeleland Conflict

Following a synthesis of various components of the study, in the final section an attempt is made to generalise from the findings and to identify possible lessons to be learned. The discussion is focused on an important difference between pre- and post-independent Zimbabwe: that of citizens’ democratic right to practice and register a political choice. Thus, the possibility to choose political allegiance.

It is noted that through the liberation war a struggle took place for the right to install democratic institutions and practice, and at post-independence political choice for all citizens was made legal. However, the newly elected government was challenged by dissidents, who were primarily seen as an organised military Zapu opposition to the ruling party. Furthermore, irrespective of a dissident link or not, the vibrant opposition party was seen as a threat to the envisaged one-party state system. Thus, citizens’ multiple political party choice became a hindrance to the hegemonic plans of the ruling party. To address this, it is argued, the ruling party needed to limit choice both in terms of discourse space and in the selection of political allegiance. Subsequently, in the context of on-going dissident activity, government rhetoric stressed that no choice other than that of military intervention in the conflict was open to the rulers, in order to find the ‘final solution’ to the ‘dissident dilemma’. Furthermore, it was emphasised that the ruling party’s position was the politically correct choice both in terms of security and national unity. Narrowing the selection of options to the minimum to solve the conflict situation paved the way for public acceptance of the government’s presented solution to militarily curb opposition. However, the citizens of Matabeleland were not easy to convince and quell, as the 1985 election results proved. Political choice for the opposition party Zapu was exercised through the ballot despite state terror, as were many other types of political choices made in opposition to the government along the route of the conflict.

The option exercised by the Matabeleland civilians despite extreme pressure is central for the way in which findings of the study are conclusively conceptualised. The
option available is seen as a *space of choice* assumed and practised by citizens to exercise free political thought and democratic rights. However, it is argued that this space of choice was contested, as the ruling party intended to implement a one-party state and strengthen the party’s power position. The contestation of this space where citizens select their political allegiance is concluded to be the *site of struggle* in the conflict. In line with this argument it is clear that in the Matabeleland conflict the subjects of the struggle were not the dissidents. They were a side event of the conflict. The subjects of the conflict were the citizens of Matabeleland North, South and Midlands who had a different political allegiance than the ruling Zanu (PF). The content of the struggle was thus on the one hand, to influence, shift or instil a political choice made by the ruling party in order to alter opposition values and beliefs, and on the other hand, the right for citizens to exercise free political choice.

The final discussion goes on to view the implications of the above reasoning regarding the space of choice, focusing on perceptions and the fact that perceptions cannot be controlled. It is noted that to the detriment of political developments in the newly independent Zimbabwe, transitions of institutions remained partial as perceptions remained linked to the former colonial power structures and forms of rule. Democratic practice and the emergence of a democratic culture were restricted as force was practised as a method to shift perspectives in a direction favoured by the ruling party. Thus, a conclusion from the Matabeleland conflict is that democracy is not guaranteed through institutional reform. Change of institutions does not necessarily take place if not followed by a democratisation of perspectives.