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African Soldiers in the USSR: Oral Histories of ZAPU Intelligence Cadres' Soviet Training, 1964–1979

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A growing literature has shed new light on interactions between the Soviet Union and Africa, notably through studies of the large numbers of African students who arrived in Moscow from 1960. Scholars have, however, largely ignored the many thousands of African military trainees who arrived in the same period. Here we begin to explore soldiers' experiences through a focus on intelligence cadres of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). We ask how their Soviet sojourns shaped their lives and ZAPU's struggle, and consider the strengths and limits of oral histories in going beyond questions of strategy and Cold War binaries. ZAPU trainees depicted themselves as men of education and political sophistication, who were able to shape the content of their training and make efficacious use of it. Their most abiding political lessons came from the understanding they gained of Soviet history – particularly the sacrifices of the 'Great Patriotic War' – and their experiences of 'living socialism'. What these cadres depicted as Soviet egalitarianism, anti-racism, and state provision for basic needs held a powerful appeal due to the dramatic contrast to settler-ruled Rhodesia. Soviet support certainly influenced ZAPU, but these accounts indicate that it did so in negotiated, pragmatic and, at times, surprising ways, which were shaped by interactions with many other foreign hosts, the influence of a specifically Rhodesian history of discrimination and oppression, and ZAPU's own assessment of its military needs.

Introduction

The arrival of African soldiers in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s took place at the confluence of decolonisation, post-Stalinist openings to foreign influence, and the rise of Cold War competition among the super powers. Their travels were part of an extraordinary and 'unexpected circulation of goods, people and information along new channels and across discontinuous world areas'.¹ In the USSR, the 'remarkable spectacle' of the 1957 Youth Festival in Moscow brought thousands of African youth and students to the city and heralded a vast expansion in opportunities for Africans to study. This moment gave way to more pragmatic and

1 J.F. Gonçalves, 'Sputnik Premiers in Havana: A Historical Ethnography of the 1960 Soviet Explosion', in A.E. Gorusch and D. Koenker (eds), *The Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 86, quoted in Q. Slobodian, 'Introduction', in Q. Slobodian (ed.), *Comrades of Color: East Germany in the Cold War World* (New York, Berghahn, 2015), p. 1. See also Robert J. McMahon (ed.), *The Cold War in the Third World* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), and S. Christiansen and Z.A. Scarlett (eds), *The Third World in the Global 1960s* (New York, Berghahn, 2013).

more militarised interactions following the Sino-Soviet split, Khrushchev's fall and the rise of the 'hot' cold war.² African experiences in the Soviet Union in this period are just beginning to be explored. Recent scholarship has focused on students' lives, telling a story of excitement and opportunity alongside disillusionment and dissent, the latter rooted in the experience of limited liberties, the realities of racism, and the dull poverty of life.³ Researchers have, however, largely ignored the many thousands of African military cadres who trained in the Soviet Union in these decades.⁴

The Soviet Union's support for liberation struggles was, of course, tremendously influential. Vladimir Shubin applauds Soviet assistance to southern African liberation movements in particular as one of the great successes of Soviet opposition to colonialism and racism.⁵ It was certainly easier for the USSR to claim the moral high ground in opposing white minority rule than in regard to other interventions on the continent, such as in the Horn of Africa.⁶ Others have cast Soviet and Eastern-bloc support for southern African liberation movements as a route through which perniciously authoritarian practices were instilled, with long-lasting consequences.⁷ Whether positive or negative, these scholars tend to neglect social and experiential aspects of liberation histories. Here we seek to build on studies of Cold War-era relations between the Eastern bloc and the global south that look at a wider set of interactions and emphasise the complexity of influences and exchanges between 'second' and 'third' worlds. This work goes beyond the binaries of contemporary political rhetoric, and introduces social and cultural questions into debates that have been dominated by matters of strategy, diplomacy and high-level politics.⁸

The somewhat narrow contours of the literature on African liberation movements' relationships with their Soviet and East European supporters are in part owed to the limited access to archives on both sides. A number of key authors, themselves participants in state solidarity structures,

2 On the Youth Festival, see M. Matusevich, 'Journeys of Hope: African Diaspora and the Soviet Society', *African Diaspora*, 1, 102 (2008), p. 69. On the USSR's shift to military support for liberation struggles following the Sino-Soviet split, see J. Friedman, 'Soviet Policy in the Developing World and the Chinese Challenge in the 1960s', *Cold War History*, 10, 2 (2010), pp. 247–72.

3 For example, J. Hessler, 'Death of an African Student in Moscow: Race, Politics and the Cold War', *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, 47, 1 (2006), pp. 33–63; A.J. Kret, "'We Unite with Knowledge": The Peoples' Friendship University and Soviet Education for the Third World', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 33, 2 (2013), pp. 239–56; M. Matusevich, 'Probing the Limits of Internationalism: African Students Confront Soviet Ritual', *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 27, 2 (2009), pp. 19–39. For new work on the GDR, see Slobodian (ed.), *Comrades of Color*, especially chapters by S. Pugach, 'African Students and the Politics of Race and Gender in the German Democratic Republic', pp. 131–56, and J. Verber, 'True to the Politics of Frelimo? Teaching Socialism at the *Schule der Freundschaft*, 1981–90', pp. 188–212.

4 Shubin emphasises scholarly neglect of the military role in the USSR's relationships with African liberation movements. V. Shubin, 'Unsung Heroes: The Soviet Military and the Liberation of Southern Africa', in S. Onslow (ed.), *Cold War in Southern Africa: White Power, Black Liberation* (London, Routledge, 2009), pp. 154–76.

5 See V. Shubin, *The Hot 'Cold War': The USSR in Southern Africa* (London, Pluto Press, 2008), and 'The Soviet Union/Russian Federation's Relations with South Africa, with Special Reference to the Period since 1980', *African Affairs*, 95, 378 (1996), pp. 5–30.

6 As M. Matusevich, 'Revisiting the Soviet Moment in Sub-Saharan Africa', *History Compass*, 7, 5 (2009), pp. 1264–5, points out.

7 In relation to the South African ANC and SWAPO, see S. Ellis, *External Mission: The ANC in Exile 1960–1990* (London, Hurst and Co., 2012), and its precursor, S. Ellis and T. Sechaba [pseud.], *Comrades against Apartheid: The ANC and the South African Communist Party in Exile* (London, James Currey, 1992); P. Trewheela, *Inside Quatro: Uncovering the Exile History of the ANC and SWAPO* (Auckland Park, Jacana, 2009), and the intense debate that this work sparked (regarding the ANC) in, for example, T. Lodge, 'Clandestine Histories: The ANC in Exile', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 40, 2 (2014), pp. 419–24; P. Landau, 'Controlled by Communists? (Re) Assessing the ANC in its Exilic Decades', *South African Historical Journal*, 67, 2 (2015), pp. 222–41; A. Lissoni, 'New Sources, Old Story: Revisionism and South African Struggle History' (unpublished ms., 2016). With regard to the MPLA in Angola, Ricardo Soares de Oliveira argues for a profound 'Eastern bloc institutional legacy' (or 'blueprint') evidenced in 'recognisably Leninist structures'. See R.S. de Oliveira, *Magnificent and Beggar Land: Angola since the Civil War* (London, Hurst and Co., 2015), p. 101. Also see J.J. Byrne, 'Africa's Cold War', in McMahon, *The Cold War in the Third World*, pp. 107–11.

8 See discussion in Slobodian, 'Introduction', p. 3.

have had privileged access to official materials and have made groundbreaking contributions based on them. Thus Vladimir Shubin's writing is central to understandings of southern African liberation movements' relations with the USSR, while Hans-Georg and Ilona Schleicher's work occupies a similar place vis-à-vis East Germany.⁹ Shubin and Hans-Georg Schleicher have represented these country's roles in the major collections on liberation struggles produced by the South African Democracy Education Trust under the patronage of former South African President Thabo Mbeki, and the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) Hashim Mbita project.¹⁰ These are not official histories and represent varied perspectives, but they share a stance that is sympathetic to liberation movements and the goals of Eastern-bloc support.

A new generation of researchers who are neither participants nor activists has begun to pose fresh questions of archives opened in the aftermath of the Cold War, notably in East Germany, and scholars have interviewed a wide range of solidarity activists.¹¹ Yet it is notable across this scholarship that there are few attempts to interview Africans about their experiences in the Eastern bloc, and there is a marked dearth of military trainees' views. Those African soldiers whose accounts do appear in this literature tend to be senior liberation movement figures, many of them speaking as holders (or one-time holders) of high political or military office, and they tend to be invoked to address strategic questions, document significant solidarity activities, or demonstrate the success of Eastern-bloc support, rather than to explore social questions.¹² What is none the less clear from this growing body of work is the diversity of experiences and engagements over time, the considerable differences among Eastern-bloc (and other) hosts, and the heterogeneous character of liberation movements.¹³ How might oral histories allow us to explore this history further? What might a focus on the social or cultural aspects of African soldiers' experiences in the USSR reveal? Would their experiences mirror those of African students? Might their accounts echo those of African soldiers trained elsewhere? How did soldiers come to see their Soviet hosts, and in what ways were their narratives shaped by a distinctive lens?

We have sought to explore some of these questions by interviewing former members of ZAPU's intelligence wings who trained in the Soviet Union between 1964 and the end of

9 See, for example, Shubin, *The Hot 'Cold War'*, H-G. Schleicher and I. Schleicher, *Special Flights: the GDR and the Liberation Movements in Southern Africa* (Harare, SAPES Books, 1998). For discussion of writing by 'participants', see T. Weis, 'The Politics Machine: On the Concept of 'Solidarity' in East German Support for SWAPO', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 37, 2 (2011), pp. 351–67, and S. Stevens, 'Bloke Modisane in East Germany', in Slobodian (ed.), *Comrades of Color*, pp. 121–30.

10 See V. Shubin with M. Traikova, 'There Is No Threat from the Eastern Bloc', and H-G. Scheicher, 'The German Democratic Republic and the South African Liberation Struggle', in SADET, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Volume Three, International Solidarity* (Pretoria, UNISA Press, 2008); V. Shubin, 'The Soviet Union and the Liberation Struggle of Southern Africa', and H-G. Schleicher, 'The German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the Liberation of Southern Africa', in A.J. Temu and J. das N. Tembe (eds), *Southern African Liberation Struggles, Volume Eight, Countries and Regions Outside SADC* (Dar es Salaam, Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, 2014).

11 Some key contributions in English with regard to the GDR are in Slobodian (ed.), *Comrades of Color*. There is a growing literature on liberation movements in exile and international solidarity (dominated by the South African ANC and the Anti-Apartheid Movement) that has explored western and African hosts and solidarity movements. For an excellent review, see H. Sapire, 'Liberation Movements, Exile and International Solidarity: An Introduction', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35, 2 (2009), pp. 271–86, and contributions to that special journal issue.

12 For example, Shubin, 'Unsung Heroes'. Memoirs and biographies have added valuable insights, but also often represent the views of influential individuals. On experiences in the USSR, see, for example, B. Gilder, *Songs and Secrets: South Africa from Liberation to Governance* (London, Hurst and Co., 2012), Chapter 2, and H. Macmillan, *Chris Hani* (Auckland Park, Jacana, 2014), pp. 27–9. On the profusion of struggle memoirs generally, see Sapire, 'Liberation Movements', p. 277 and *passim*.

13 For a poignant example of the dramatically different positions and interpretations among South African visitors to the GDR, see Stevens, 'Bloke Modisane'.

Zimbabwe's liberation war in 1979. We spoke with seven such men, identifying them through our long-standing research relationship with members of ZAPU and its armed wing.¹⁴ We focused on military intelligence training because it offered a wider range of engagements with Soviet instructors and hosts than its strictly military analogue. It typically combined stints at the Perevalnoye military training centre (located on the outskirts of Simferapol, on the Crimean peninsula) with academic, political and technical training at the 'Northern Training Camp' in Moscow and other locations.¹⁵ The trainees lived in cities, and they visited far-flung sites such as agricultural co-operatives and monuments. These experiences differed from those of other military cadres in the USSR, as well as from our interviewees' (and many others') experiences of training in African countries such as Zambia, Tanzania, Mozambique and Angola, where they lived in military camps governed directly by the liberation movement.¹⁶ While intelligence cadres' Soviet training allowed diverse and new experiences, their stays were none the less regimented, utilitarian and relatively short-term (usually 8–11 months) when compared with those of African students.¹⁷

Military intelligence training in the Soviet Union thus constituted a distinct category in some ways, yet the seven men we interviewed also had varied experiences and told varied stories. In part, this was because they left for the USSR at different junctures in ZAPU's history. Some were trained at the outset of the armed struggle in the early 1960s, when sabotage was the party's leading strategy. Others left in the aftermath of ZAPU's internal crisis in the early 1970s, when military action was paralysed and relations with the Soviet Union were strained. Still others trained in the USSR at the height of ZAPU's military expansion in the late 1970s, just as it was consolidating a powerful, conventional 'military machine'. Differences also arose from the diverse positions our interviewees held over the course of the struggle and subsequently. Some became prominent war-time figures. Most notably, Dumiso Dabengwa, who was one of the earliest recruits to ZAPU's nascent intelligence wing, headed the National Security Organisation (NSO), an overarching security and intelligence unit created in 1978, which held civilian, military and strategic briefs.¹⁸ Abel Mazinyane served in the top posts in the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army's (ZIPRA) military intelligence until he was posted to Yugoslavia in 1978.¹⁹ Our other interviewees were less senior, some holding posts in the NSO, but most serving in the NSO's ranks towards the end of the war. An unusual cadre was Ronnie Patel, one of the very few Asians to join the liberation struggle. NSO members

14 See J. Alexander, J. McGregor and T. Ranger, *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the 'Dark Forests' of Matabeleland* (Oxford, James Currey, 2000). Since the publication of this book, we have both interviewed many other members of ZAPU about their exile (and other) experiences in the military and party. We do not draw on this work here save in passing.

15 See Shubin, 'Unsung Heroes', pp. 160–62, on ZAPU and *passim* for an account of the military facilities and training offered to southern African liberation movements in the USSR.

16 The story of soldiers' experiences of these camps is complex and varied – we cannot delve into it in depth here. For an excellent book-length study (and exploration of a fast-growing literature), see C. Williams, *National Liberation in Postcolonial Southern Africa: A Historical Ethnography of SWAPO's Exile Camps* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015), and, for a particularly insightful consideration of evidence and interpretation in the study of a camp, see S. Davis, 'Training and Deployment at Novo Catengue and the Diaries of Jack Simons, 1977–1979', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 40, 6 (2014), pp. 1325–42.

17 African students usually spent a minimum of five years in the USSR. Their diverse motives and aspirations and their less regulated interactions allowed for a more intimate knowledge of Soviet society than that of soldiers of most kinds. On African students at the Peoples' Friendship University in Moscow, see Kret, "'We Unite with Knowledge'", p. 243 and *passim*.

18 See J. Brickhill, 'Daring to Storm the Heavens: The Military Strategy of ZAPU, 1976–79', in N. Bhebe and T. Ranger (eds), *Soldiers in Zimbabwe's Liberation War* (London, James Currey, 1995), pp. 54–55, on the influential role of the NSO and Dabengwa.

19 Mazinyane's career is discussed in P. Nyathi, *The Story of a ZPRCA Cadre: Nicholas Macala Dube 'Ben Mvelase'* *Biography* (Bulawayo, Amagugu Publishers, 2014), pp. 168–71. According to Nyathi, Mazinyane was appointed as deputy chief of military intelligence under Gordon Munyanyi in 1976, and subsequently served under Dingani Mlilo before becoming chief of military intelligence in 1977, a post he held until sometime in 1978.

tended to be drawn from the better-educated ranks of ZAPU cadres (an ‘O’-level education was considered a minimum qualification, according to NSO members) owing to the organisation’s key role in anticipating post-independence state-building.

Unusually, given the seniority of some of these men, none held positions of power in government or military at the time of our interviews. This was largely due to the on-going consequences of the violent marginalisation of ZAPU at the hands of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front) (ZANU[PF]) in the 1980s. Most of our interviewees suffered persecution in that period, though several, including Dabengwa (who was imprisoned for many years on charges of treason) emerged to take up senior government posts after ZAPU was subsumed in ZANU(PF) under the Unity Accord of 1987. Others, such as Lazarus Ncube, managed to retain positions in the Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA) from 1980 to the early 2000s. Dabengwa left the ruling party in December 2007 and went on to lead a group of former ZAPU cadres who rejected the Unity Accord and set out to ‘resuscitate’ the original ZAPU.²⁰ His prominent past, alongside this position, gave him a public profile in on-going debates over liberation-war history, war-veteran affairs and other political matters. Unsurprisingly, none of our interviewees was interested in constructing narratives designed to legitimise the regime in power: their stories had heroic elements, but they ended in marginality and frustration, and all portrayed ZANU(PF)’s public representation of the history of the armed struggle as a distortion of ZAPU’s past. Dabengwa and Mazinyane have engaged in history writing themselves, while all our interviewees have been involved in veterans’ organisations concerned to document ZAPU’s struggle.²¹ The on-going debates over liberation-war history and its political uses in the present motivated our interviewees to tell their stories and to tell them in particular ways, with an emphasis on ZAPU’s military and other strengths as a liberation movement and the terrible waste that followed from their exclusion from power after 1980.

These agendas undoubtedly shaped our interviewees’ accounts: they told their stories with a sense of the need for historical redress as well as with great pride in ZAPU’s particular character and accomplishments. The narratives are important in alerting us to a continuing demand for recognition, but they also tell stories that illuminate the specific nature of Soviet experiences, as distinct from other war-time episodes. We focus here on the commonalities that marked these narratives, in order to explore the issues that were – and are – significant to all our interviewees. First, none of our interviewees portrayed themselves as passive subjects: these were not stories of the imposition or straightforward replication of ideas or practices. Their sense of their capacity to shape the content and uses of their training (both military and ideological) hinged on a consciousness of themselves as politically sophisticated, educated men and on a clear sense of the specific demands of their struggle. Second, these ZAPU cadres stressed that the formation of their political views in the USSR owed less to ideological teaching than to the lessons they drew from their exposure to the history of the Second World War and from their observation of Soviet society, both filtered through the understandings of racial discrimination and inequality that they had brought with them from Rhodesia. Finally, these men made clear that the effects of Soviet exposure on ZAPU’s armed struggle could not be considered in isolation. Ideas, tactics and technical knowledge derived from the Soviet Union were adopted selectively and often combined with knowledge gained from other experiences of training, mobilising and fighting inside and outside southern Africa.

20 E-mail communication, Dumiso Dabengwa to Jocelyn Alexander, 21 September 2016.

21 See D. Dabengwa, ‘ZIPRA in the Zimbabwe War of National Liberation’, in Bhebe and Ranger (eds), *Soldiers*, pp. 24–35; Mazinyane has written for some time on struggle history for the *Sunday News*, one of the main Zimbabwean papers. See particularly A. Mazinyane, ‘To Russia, With Love’, *Sunday Mail*, 10 May 2015. On ZIPRA soldiers’ narratives in the mid 1990s and early 2000s, see J. Alexander and J. McGregor, ‘War Stories: Guerrilla Narratives of Zimbabwe’s Liberation War’, *History Workshop Journal*, 57, 1 (2004), pp. 79–100. For the important work of the Mafela Trust (made up of veterans) in documenting ZIPRA history, see J. Brickhill, ‘Making Peace with the Past: War Victims and the Work of the Mafela Trust’, in Bhebe and Ranger, *Soldiers*, pp. 163–73.

Before we elaborate on these points, we briefly explore our interviewees' accounts of their arrival in the Soviet Union. These stories told of surprise, gratitude and ambiguity – foreshadowing subsequent interactions – and underlined the distinctiveness of the USSR as a venue for training and political instruction.

Soviet Arrivals

How did African military trainees imagine the Soviet Union and what did they make of their first encounters? While many of our interviewees had prior experience of foreign training, they had very little idea of what to expect of the Soviet Union, though the place had a certain shadowy presence and enigmatic attraction.

Dabengwa was among the earliest of ZAPU's arrivals in the Soviet Union. He landed in Moscow in 1964 as the 24-year-old leader of a group of six cadres sent for military intelligence training by James Chikerema, the head of ZAPU's nascent military wing, the Department of Special Affairs. As a member of ZAPU's youth wing in Bulawayo, Dabengwa had been involved in an expanding campaign of sabotage. He had come into contact with cadres trained in China and had used bombs and grenades smuggled from the Congo, somewhat inexpertly – he and his youth league comrades had had no formal military training. The Soviet Union offered the possibility of far more serious military engagement. Dabengwa explained, 'we had all sorts of raw experiences. What was exciting to us was to be able to learn the real thing and how to do it properly'. But, he admitted, they had 'no idea what we would find' in the Soviet Union.²² This lack of foreknowledge was echoed across accounts. Marshall Mpofo's ideas, for example, derived from his 'O' level studies: 'we'd only read about the USSR, and World War One and World War Two, and the part that the allied forces played against Hitler'.²³

Dabengwa's group travelled to Moscow from Lusaka, via Dar es Salaam and Sudan. On arrival at the airport, they were met by men bearing warm coats: the first encounter with the USSR's wintry weather formed a visceral memory for most of the trainees, often coupled with accounts of the care that their hosts took to ease the chill.²⁴ When Zephaniah Moyo arrived in Moscow in late 1977, he too remembered the 'big coat' he was given, and the 'balaclava where you close your ears'.²⁵ He vividly recalled the snowy scene in Moscow: 'when we arrived we were shocked. We were seeing people seated with their little sticks, putting them in, out, in, out. We didn't realise they were sitting on top of Moscow river, fishing.... It was just white! ... We thought they were catching small insects on the ground'.²⁶ Abel Mazinyane flew with a group to the Soviet Union in 1972, following training in Zambia and Tanzania. He recalled: 'when we first arrived in Moscow, the weather, you could tell you were somewhere else!' His group was grateful for the thoughtfulness of their hosts, as Mazinyane remembered in great detail:

on arrival, immediately someone came to the place and advised us not to come out of the plane. So we remained in the plane in our short-sleeved shirts. We got coats, we put them on, they drove the small minibus under the wing of the plane, right at the door, [so] we could get straight in the minibus [which] was already warm.

22 Interview with Dumiso Dabengwa, Bulawayo, 13 December 2014. All interviews for this article were conducted by the authors, in whose archives the transcripts are lodged.

23 Interview with Marshall Mpofo, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014. Also see, for example, interview with Lazarus Ncube, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014. For others, the unknown quantity of the Soviet Union sparked a fearful imagination. Former ZIPRA commander Nicholas Nkomo describes wondering whether he would find a place 'populated by normal people without tails and fangs' when he was sent to the Soviet Union for military training in 1975. N. Nkomo, *Between the Hammer and the Anvil: The Autobiography of Nicholas Nkomo* (unpublished ms., n.d.), p. 16.

24 Interview with Dabengwa, Bulawayo, 13 December 2014.

25 Interview with Zephaniah Moyo, Bulawayo, 9 December 2014.

26 *Ibid.* On wintry conditions, see also interview with Stool Matiwa, Bulawayo, 10 December 2014.

The literal and metaphorical warmth of this welcome was reinforced shortly thereafter by the provision of what was, from Mazinyane's point of view, a sumptuous meal: 'they gave us a bowl of soup and black bread – for us guerrillas, we'd come from camps, we thought that was the main meal. But it was the first course of a three-course meal! A sort of culture shock. A three-course meal! Oh!'²⁷

Just as the cold, snow and food marked the Soviet Union out as different from Rhodesia and the varied African host countries that these men had previously visited, so did the experience of arriving in a country in which people were predominantly white, as we explore further below. In these first interactions, racial difference cast a pall of suspicion, most notably over the medical examinations to which military trainees were routinely subjected on arrival. These involved an intrusive physical examination followed by a shower and the incineration of one's clothes. Such practices were at times interpreted in the light of knowledge of white Rhodesian views of African hygiene, and long-standing practices of medical screening in southern Africa's towns and mines. Mazinyane wondered, did they 'think we're not a bathing people? You know, coming out, a contact with a white person was always taken with suspicion'.²⁸

These wary initial reactions were common, but they tended not to last as the business of training took centre stage and as interactions with Soviet trainers and society broadened cadres' experiences and reshaped their views.

Autonomy, Training and Political Identity

The literature on African students in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s emphasises their relative freedoms. Students were able to express dissent more easily than their Soviet counterparts and they contested restrictions on political expression, challenged racism, and complained of poor living conditions. Students' capacity to protest partly reflected the Soviet desire to protect its anti-racist and anti-imperialist credentials.²⁹ Unlike students, the ZAPU military cadres to whom we spoke expected an austere, regimented existence. Most had prior experience of military camps and training and they did not expect material comforts or opportunities for protest. However, and in stark contrast to accounts of life in military camps in African host countries, all generations of cadres whom we interviewed described negotiating the content of their training directly with Soviet instructors, whom they cast as sympathetic. In explaining their ability to negotiate, they drew on a pervasive self-image of ZAPU as educated, professional and loyal to a disciplined party, characteristics that, they considered, distinguished them from other liberation movements, and merited the respect of their Soviet instructors.³⁰

Dabengwa's account of interaction and negotiation related to the early days of ZAPU's relationship with the Soviet Union, and exemplified the sense of goodwill and exchange that permeated our interviewees' accounts. His group was taken straight to a house in the suburbs of Moscow, where a 'commandant' explained logistical arrangements and left them to settle

27 Interview with Abel Mazinyane, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014.

28 *Ibid.* Nicholas Nkomo recounts a similar moment of anger and doubt during his medical screening: '[t]his action by the bloody communists reminded us of the treatment we used to get from the whites back home ... Were they doing all this to us because we were black and might affect the superior race with our animalistic diseases?' Nkomo, *Between the Hammer and the Anvil*, p. 16. But compare with D. Dabengwa, 'Relations between ZAPU and the USSR, 1960s–1970s: A Personal View', elsewhere in this issue.

29 See Kret, "'We Unite with Knowledge'", and Matusевич, 'An Exotic Subversive: Africa, Africans and the Soviet Everyday', *Race and Class*, 49, 4 (2008), pp. 57–81. Compare to Pugach, 'African Students', on the GDR. Pugach explores the variations in official reactions to African students' demands and what were seen as moral and sexual transgressions. She notes that tolerance was shaped by a desire to distance the GDR from the Nazi past and to distinguish it from the FRG and the western world generally.

30 On ZAPU cadres' self-image as 'professionals', most often elaborated in contrast to ZANU, but, as we explore below, also to other liberation movements, see Alexander, McGregor and Ranger, *Violence and Memory*, chapter 6; Brickhill, 'Daring to Storm the Heavens', pp. 48–72.

for the weekend. When they met their instructor a few days later, they set about discussing the content of their training. As Dabengwa explained:

The training director ... gave us the full description of what our course would comprise of. He wanted to know if there was anything that they had left out that we think we needed to be trained in. So we had those discussions and finally came up with a full training programme which involved some of the things we'd mentioned.

Dabengwa said that his group insisted that they 'wanted to know all the weapons that would be used by all our detachments, right up to the anti-air guns, and get some experience, even if we didn't fire them, get to understand how they operate and that kind of thing'. They also wanted some very practical knowledge for the purposes of sabotage: 'we wanted to know how we could get our own explosives'.³¹

Shubin's account of the training of African National Congress (ANC) cadres in this early period makes it clear that, from the start, the Soviet military worked to provide guerrilla training appropriate to the needs of the southern African movements, drawing on its own experiences in the Second World War in doing so.³² Among later cohorts of ZAPU cadres, there was in addition great praise for the advanced technology supplied by the Soviets, and the military power it delivered, whether it was aimed at stopping the Americans in Vietnam or the Rhodesian Army. Veneration of technical capacity was very much a part of the Soviet ethos of this time, and it certainly awed trainees.³³ The ZAPU cadres also consistently stressed the importance of adapting Soviet training and technology to the challenges of the Rhodesian war, which differed both from other southern African contexts and from the conditions faced by Soviet partisans in the Second World War. Weapons, for example, needed to be modified to suit the southern African climate. But the adaptations were more far-reaching than this. Mazinyane explained that 'the ideas' needed to be adjusted to take account of Rhodesia's developed infrastructure and the dominance of Rhodesian air power. Transport and communications networks were such that 'the Rhodesian army could move immediately from here [Bulawayo] to the [Victoria] Falls within a day without coming across an obstacle, and then come back, [and] send their soldiers into the bush'. This was not the case in countries such as Mozambique, where 'the Portuguese had never been to the places they had to get to. So we had to adjust'. In contrast to the Soviet experience, ZIPRA lacked an air force, so, although 'the partisans could do some air drops for their supplies, with us, we had to carry ours'. The collection of intelligence was also weighted towards 'working with the population' rather than the use of, for example, sophisticated listening devices.³⁴

The wartime context of the late 1970s altered ZAPU's needs once more, driving the demands made of their Soviet hosts in new ways. Moyo, who arrived in the USSR in 1977, described adapting intelligence training to the demands of dealing with the influx of many thousands of recruits and refugees to Zambian camps. ZAPU needed to provide effective screening in order to identify infiltrators and to extend social services such as health and education. It was also, under the aegis of the newly instituted NSO, in the midst of developing extensive state-like institutions that required training police, border guards and customs officials.³⁵

31 Interview with Dabengwa, Bulawayo, 13 December 2014.

32 Shubin, 'Unsung Heroes', pp. 156–8.

33 For example, interviews with Mazinyane, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014; Moyo, Bulawayo, 9 December 2014. Soviet technical prowess was, of course, a central element in Cold War competition, symbolised perhaps most famously by the Sputnik launch and the space race.

34 Interview with Mazinyane, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014. Adaptation of military training to Rhodesian conditions also occurred in other contexts. On Frelimo training of ZANLA, see C.V.L. Mungambe, 'Nationalism and Exile in an Age of Solidarity', elsewhere in this issue; on Chinese training of ZANLA, see W. Mhanda, *Dzino: Memories of a Freedom Fighter* (Harare, Weaver Press, 2011).

35 Police were trained in Zambia, border guards in the Soviet Union, and customs and immigration officials in Yugoslavia. Interview with Moyo, Bulawayo, 2 October 2008.

Moyo held that the Soviets were useful in technical areas such as providing mine and bomb detectors, and in advising on how to create institutional structures, for instance to undertake border controls. But even institutional models needed adaptation. As Moyo explained: ‘you can get the information but it will [not] be easy to practise it in a foreign land where you don’t have enough resources, [where you are] working underground, [and] you can’t establish a big office and have all the people in one place’.³⁶ In Zambia, ZAPU had learned to disperse its cadres to avoid capture, bombing and raids, and it created separate cells to minimise damage following capture.

In negotiating these aspects of training over the years, these men felt that they had the support and sympathy of their Soviet instructors. They illustrated this by narrating episodes in which their Soviet hosts showed concern for them as people, demonstrated not only by the warm coats and rich food that they were given, but also their generous stipends. Marshall Mpfu explained that his monthly allowance of 25 roubles was ‘a lot of money’: it allowed him to buy his first suit.³⁷ The trainees also believed in the genuine nature of Soviet solidarity, because military instruction was closely tied to significant flows of weaponry: Mazinyane argued that the Soviets ‘went out of their way to help us. Sometimes we had weapons that were surpassing those of the armies that hosted us!’³⁸

Soviet support of this kind was also given to other liberation movements, but our interviewees felt that their interactions were different. They held that they impressed their instructors more than most – the South African ANC excepted – due to their ability to learn quickly and exercise independent judgement as a result of what they considered their superior levels of education, experience of urban life, and political organisation. To an extent, this self-perception was based on real differences rooted in the relatively high levels of education, urbanisation and formal-sector employment in Rhodesia compared to the rest of the region (save South Africa), and to the long-standing practice of labour migration to South Africa’s cities and mines from ZAPU’s main recruiting regions of the 1970s.³⁹ Mazinyane described how some cadres from Mozambique and Angola had ‘never been to town in their life’: they had ‘not been exposed’. He thought ZAPU’s cadres were given more advanced training as a result of their excellent English and the fact that, ‘we were faster to assimilate things because of our exposure to towns’.⁴⁰ Moyo reinforced the point, noting the ease with which his group undertook urban training assignments. He explained that, ‘when you train in intelligence, from time to time you have to do some practical courses. Sometimes we were taken to the city, so they wanted to monitor us, our behaviour’. While trainees from Guinea–Bissau remained fixed in place, Moyo’s group covered great distances, surprising their instructors:

they thought we were coming from underdeveloped countries in Africa where there were no cars, no robots [traffic lights]. They couldn’t believe we could cross robots, drive vehicles.... They had

36 Interview with Moyo, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014.

37 Interview with Mpfu, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014.

38 Interview with Mazinyane, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014.

39 See Brickhill’s discussion, ‘Daring to Storm the Heavens’, pp. 65–7, in which he argues for ‘the predominance of recruits with experience of modern urban capitalism’ (p. 67). This was more likely to have been the case prior to ZIPRA’s rapid growth at the end of the 1970s, when recruits tended to be younger and to come directly from rural areas. It should also be noted that the perception of ZIPRA as particularly ‘professional’ in the senses described by our interviewees was shared by others who interacted with both liberation armies at the end of the war, including members of the Commonwealth Monitoring Force, British Military Advisory Training Team, and Rhodesian Security Forces. See B-M. Tendi, ‘Soldiers contra Diplomats: Britain’s Role in the Zimbabwe/Rhodesia Ceasefire (1979–1980)’, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 26, 6 (2015), pp. 937–56; S. Rice, ‘The Commonwealth Initiative in Zimbabwe, 1979–1980: Implications for International Peacekeeping’ (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 1990); and N. Kriger, *Guerrilla Veterans in Post-War Zimbabwe: Symbolic and Violent Politics 1980–1987* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003).

40 Interview with Mazinyane, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014.

seen groups from various countries who were trained as guerrillas who were coming right from the rural background, without any experience of city life. Some of us had a lot of experience.

Moyo held a Rhodesian driving licence and had worked for many years for the Rhodesian police; his fellow cadres also had experience of urban employment, including one man who had worked for the Rhodesian Broadcasting Company.⁴¹

ZAPU cadres also attributed their negotiating capacity to their movement's discipline and political sophistication. They drew a contrast with the sloganeering and top-down hierarchies of other movements. As Mazinyane explained, 'maybe that's our interpretation, but ... if one of the leaders came to visit, we had order. Others struggled to make that order we had'. He cast this 'order' as the product of an empowering political education that ran through the ranks:

all our guys could answer anything about the party. What does ZAPU think about this? All of us could answer that to a certain point to satisfy the one asking. But these other colleagues were just cadres. Frelimo had slogans, but with us, even our own political orientation was a bit higher. When we'd be asked to think about Marxism, we already had ideas Interaction with the leadership was also very free, there was a lot of flowing of information between the leaders and the cadres, unlike the others. I think they were given what they were supposed to know. Us, we could defend the party under whatever circumstances because we knew. They realised we'd raise questions that would challenge their system. That made them give us more than they thought we deserved.⁴²

These practices, Mazinyane explained, were rooted in ZAPU's long-standing committee structures inside Rhodesia, which meant that cadres had often been recruited through the party and hence were politicised before they joined the armed struggle: 'so you go to the Soviet Union, you already know there was a party, you want to compare your party with their party, which was highly developed'. Mazinyane felt that this was the reason ZAPU cadres were sent to the party school in Moscow along with South African uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) cadres and guerrilla groups that had liberated areas, such as the Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC).⁴³

Challenges to Soviet instructors were not always well met, of course, but nor were they ruled out. ZIPRA cadres recalled successfully fighting for radios and access to the BBC World Service, which ordinary Russians were not allowed, and pressing their instructors to explain the meaning of political changes under way within the Soviet Union, such as the fall of Khrushchev.⁴⁴ It is, however, the manifest utility of the military and technical training they gained that stands out in these accounts, rather than complaints or stories of imposition. For example, Ncube described his Soviet training as superior to that in Zambia, where facilities were lacking, and to that in the ZNA after independence. In the Soviet Union, 'the buildings and training were very impressive The most useful aspect was combat warfare, and we were trained in mechanical and chemical warfare'. He recalled his intelligence training with great pride. It had included, 'collecting combat information by stealth, spying on the enemy, numbers, equipment, identifying aircraft, artillery, tanks. So we were specialists in equipment, routine, notes for attack. We really used that on return. Also analysing combat – making notes of events or sounds and submitting a report – I was good at that'.⁴⁵ Stool Matiwa felt that his Soviet officer training had allowed him to make a real contribution to the struggle: 'we were taught up to brigade level ... so we could come and teach other young soldiers how to be soldiers – that was the most important'.⁴⁶

41 Interview with Moyo, Bulawayo, 9 December 2014.

42 Interview with Mazinyane, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014.

43 *Ibid.* See also Brickhill, 'Daring to Storm the Heavens', pp. 67–8.

44 Interview with Dabengwa, 13 December 2014.

45 Interview with Ncube, 11 December 2014.

46 Interview with Matiwa, 10 December 2014. See also interview with Dabengwa, 13 December 2014.

These Zimbabwean cadres' sense of their political and social identity was central to their accounts of the positive relationships that they were able to build with Soviet instructors and the value that they were able to derive from their technical and military training. These were, above all, stories of efficacy and empowerment.

Ideology as History and 'Living Socialism'

The sense of choice and agency expressed with regard to intelligence training also suffused our interviewees' accounts of ideological lessons. Once again, their accounts differ from those of African students in the Eastern bloc. Students at Moscow's Friendship University were exempted from the 'most ideologically fraught subjects such as the history of the Communist Party, political economy, Marxism-Leninism, and fundamentals of scientific communism', all required of their Soviet counterparts, though they chafed none the less against political orthodoxies,⁴⁷ while in East Germany they were 'inundated with Marxist ideology'.⁴⁸ Such experiences led to disaffection and, for some, a departure for the west.⁴⁹ In our interviewees' accounts, the classroom teaching of ideology did not stand at the heart of their political education, nor did they feel that a particular view was imposed upon them. They held that they were encouraged to make choices based on the conditions of their own societies, and emphasised how they absorbed political ideas indirectly, outside the classroom, most notably through learning about Soviet history and through their experience of 'living socialism' – that is, their interactions with and observations of Soviet society. In both cases, the views that they formed were powerfully shaped by the comparative frame of their political and social experiences at home in Rhodesia.

Soviet history, most importantly in the form of the Great Patriotic War, constituted a significant part of our interviewees' accounts of their political education. Soviet instructors created a powerful sense of the suffering and sacrifice of the Second World War through the use of films and visits to memorials.⁵⁰ This history was also dramatically embodied by those instructors who were Second World War veterans of guerrilla war. As Shubin notes, the head of the 'Northern Training Centre' was for many years Major-General Fyodor Fedorenko, 'an ex-Second World War guerrilla commander in the Crimea'.⁵¹ For Dabengwa, ideological training was 'a history of the USSR really. They came in and ... showed us how they had finally got to the stage where they formed the Communist Party of the Soviet Union right down from Stalin and how they operated during the various wars they went through'. He was inspired by films about the Second World War and the personal stories of the partisans who taught his group. Dabengwa found the films 'of how the Russian army fought against the Germans ... very moving': 'the dedication that they had – we were quite impressed. It gave us an urge to come back home and be able to do the same'.⁵²

47 Kret, "'We Unite with Knowledge'", pp. 243–4.

48 Pugach, 'African Students', p. 133.

49 See Q. Slobodian, 'Socialist Chromatism: Race, Racism and the Racial Rainbow in East Germany', in Slobodian (ed.), *Comrades of Color*, p. 31; Q. Slobodian, 'Bandung in Divided Germany: Managing Non-Aligned Politics in East and West, 1955–63', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 41, 4 (2013), pp. 653–4.

50 Histories of the Second World War were also used to create an identification with the liberation movements among Eastern-bloc citizens. Slobodian, 'Socialist Chromatism', p. 32, notes 'the depth of empathy felt by East German citizens for those struggling against invasion, occupation and racialized oppression, and the salience of a moralized sense of differentiation from the U.S.-led bloc', despite resentment of compulsory acts of solidarity.

51 Shubin, 'Unsung Heroes', p. 156.

52 Interview with Dabengwa, Bulawayo, 13 December 2014.

Such accounts were echoed among our interviewees throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Referring to his training in the early 1970s, Abel Mazinyane recalled in vivid detail his historical lessons:

they'd show you some films of the Soviet Union. It lost 20 million. Huge. But the German army was about how many kilometres from Moscow? Just close to the airport, as you enter the suburbs, there's a place where the Germans were stopped. It's called Volkalas. They were stopped there, then from there they drove them up to Berlin. They portray this patriotism – it touches you. People sacrificed so much. Some people stopping a machine gun, running into it to stop it so that others could advance. That had an impact on us who were fighting for our independence.⁵³

Trained in 1977, Moyo remembered travelling to a series of historical sites. He recounted a visit to Belarus to visit the grave and home of Felix Dzerzhinsky, 'the first intelligence officer', the man who (infamously) established the Soviet secret police in 1917. Moyo's group was also taken to Khatyn, site of a notorious Nazi massacre in March 1943. Moyo explained that the site was used to educate young communists 'about the horrors of the German occupation'. It did the same for him. He recalled being shown 'charred bodies in glass caskets' – 'you couldn't believe it, you look at the ribs of the charred body'. They visited a site in the area where

some Russian soldiers were cornered and they had to sense that they were not to surrender but to pay ... with their blood. So they used the blood of their fallen comrades to write on the walls before they were killed. They wrote, we are five and we are not prepared to surrender. We don't want to be captured. We'd rather die. And they were killed. In this village, where a lot of people were killed, there were bells which were ringing every five minutes simultaneously, representing the whole village, valley, every five minutes. There was a big bronze of an old man who, after they were butchered, he regained consciousness and had to look around ... for his grandson. He was able to pick him, and then he had to hold him so they had to make this big statue about this old man who survived It was a moving situation.

Moyo compared the Nazi crushing of Khatyn to settler-ruled Rhodesia. His family had faced eviction when he was a child, but, 'the Zimbabwe situation wasn't that bad compared to what the Germans did. When we were young, we were chased away from the Matopos, but they only pushed down our building No one was killed mercilessly'.⁵⁴

All our interviewees retained powerful memories, decades after these encounters, of the scale of suffering and the bravery and sacrifice of Soviet soldiers in the Great Patriotic War, and derived inspiration from them. Some drew additional conclusions. Matiwaza saw 'that they had also suffered' in a way 'similar to ours', but had none the less managed to establish an advanced economy. He took a positive message from this triumph in the face of such terrible loss – if the Soviet Union could recover and rebuild, so too could Zimbabwe.⁵⁵ Ncube was inspired by the 'hard work' and 'commitment' that Soviet heroism had required, and he was struck especially by the widespread recognition of heroes 'even in the villages'.⁵⁶ In much the same vein, Mpofo said that he had learnt that 'people make history'. He remembered thinking, 'if our people had to be given help, maybe they could make their own history For a young man it was an empowering idea'.⁵⁷

This engagement with Soviet history was not just context for military training, nor was it understood simply as propaganda for a political system. It was portrayed perhaps above all as a lesson in the necessity of sacrifice and political commitment in war, and spoken of with passion by our interviewees. Ideological lessons were couched in this history; they were complemented

53 Interview with Mazinyane, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014; see also interview with Ncube, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014.

54 Interview with Moyo, Bulawayo, 9 December 2014.

55 Interview with Matiwaza, Bulawayo, 10 December 2014.

56 Interview with Ncube, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014.

57 Interview with Mpofo, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014.

by social interaction and observation. Our interviewees were keen observers of Soviet society – of the ‘living socialism’ they encountered. As Alexei Yurchak writes, “‘socialism’ as a system of human values and as an everyday reality of “normal life” (*normal’naia zhiez’n*) was not necessarily equivalent to “the state” or “ideology”; indeed, living socialism ... often meant something quite different from the official interpretations provided by state rhetoric’.⁵⁸ ZAPU cadres’ judgements drew on these distinctions and other considerations, notably their understandings of the social system against which they were fighting in Rhodesia, and the possibilities of revolutionary transformation at home. Later generations of recruits’ perspectives were also shaped by their exposure to socialist teaching in the ZAPU camps in Zambia and Tanzania or through visits to China, Ghana, Algeria and elsewhere. As with military training, the relevance to ZAPU’s struggle of these varied political ideas was the subject of much discussion.

Our interviewees consistently insisted that they were told by their instructors that they should not adopt the Soviet way of doing things wholesale: they should choose what suited their circumstances. As Dabengwa explained:

they justified their communist ideology, how it would work and so on and what we should expect – not because they wanted us to copy them but, they said, you can select the good things out of the experience we have had. From our communist ideology you can select what you think, if it is good enough for Zimbabwe, and see how you can adapt it to your own situation.⁵⁹

Later recruits, such as Matiwaza, had already had ‘lectures on socialism and so forth’ in Zambian and Tanzanian camps, including from a ZAPU instructor who had trained in the USSR. Other members of his group of eight had trained in China and Ghana. This, Matiwaza held, gave them a sound basis for choosing what was useful from what they learnt in the USSR. His group were already ‘all convinced, all committed’ to socialism as the correct goal for ZAPU and for an independent Zimbabwe. He recalled their understanding of socialism as a combination of ‘the people’ owning the ‘means of production’ and having the ‘powers to rule the country’. As with Dabengwa, their Soviet instructors encouraged them to make their own choices: ‘they didn’t say go and do socialism at your homes comrades, but they said you are going to decide’. For Matiwaza, the most important ‘political lessons’ he learned concerned the central role of the institution of the party in both political struggle and governance, a lesson that fitted well with ZAPU’s own views.⁶⁰ Such experiences were echoed widely, with the emphasis often placed on trainees’ ability to make informed choices, and the prior existence of strong political beliefs. As Ncube explained, ‘indoctrination was also there, but we had our own line and nothing could interfere with it’.⁶¹

By far the most compelling political lessons remembered by our interviewees were those that they derived from their encounters with ‘living socialism’, and specifically the stark contrast they saw between Soviet egalitarianism and provision for citizens’ needs and Rhodesia’s deeply unequal and discriminatory society. Ncube remembered his shock at the very idea of human beings being equal: ‘we couldn’t believe it when they said you are equal’. He continued ‘we wanted a new way of life where everyone was equal. Capitalism was the worst thing you could imagine’.⁶² The ZAPU cadres were astounded by what they saw as access for all to services, work and basic care. Mazinyane recalled that there were ‘no beggars, no homeless people. It

58 A. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until it Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 8.

59 Interview with Dabengwa, Bulawayo, 13 December 2014.

60 Interview with Matiwaza, Bulawayo, 10 December 2014.

61 Interview with Ncube, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014.

62 *Ibid.*

was striking: everyone was working'.⁶³ Dabengwa, who did not describe himself as having been a committed socialist, nevertheless remembered being deeply inspired that,

everybody has almost an equal opportunity to prove themselves in any field and, without paying any [school] fees, you'd get up to the highest qualifications you wanted. Also we were impressed with health care, how everybody is looked after ... Also the issue of shelter, which are the basic things in life, which everybody looks for. And making sure everybody has an opportunity to work and have food on the table. Those were the main attractive things that we got to learn about.

These were ideas that he had wanted to emulate, and now recalled with a powerful sense of missed opportunity: 'we said if only when we get back home we can have a government set-up that will be able at least to ensure these basic necessities in life are taken care of – that would be our starting point'.⁶⁴

Many of our interviewees remembered being struck by what they saw as a lack of rigid social hierarchy in the USSR, and recalled forming the view that this was a result of deliberate state action. Mazinyane remembered with wonder that poor 'babushkas' were able to fly on planes. The salient thing for him was 'ordinary people having access to things. From where we came from, we were a prisoner of the elite. That way of life convinces you there is a better way than the one where I'm coming from. We can also strive to achieve this'. The contrast with the Rhodesian state was profound: at home, Mazinyane explained, 'our group was not part of anything, so the state was suppressing us. There [in the USSR] was a state saying everyone was equal – that was good. That was the main message: this state was good, it gives everyone equal opportunity'.⁶⁵

The idea that the state might work to create equal opportunities for all, rather than doing precisely the opposite, reinforced ZAPU cadres' view that they were fighting a 'system', not a race.⁶⁶ In these accounts, the Soviet experience underlined the central role of state and party in the making of a just system for all. For some cadres, this marked a significant reorientation, while others felt that it reinforced ZAPU's long-standing non-racialism, an attribute that set it apart from fellow nationalists in ZANU. In either case, they elaborated their understandings of race in the light of both the centrality of anti-racism to Soviet ideology and the experience of being black in the Soviet Union. Initial suspicions regarding racism were common, but our interviewees explained that they were usually overcome. For military trainees, this was at times due to the simple fact of enjoying the same living conditions as (white) Soviet counterparts.⁶⁷ Our interviewees, who travelled and interacted more widely, had more varied encounters.

Moyo recalled with some anger that, as a black policeman in Rhodesia, he had been treated as a labourer by his white colleagues and had been unable to move freely in the racially demarcated spaces of his home city, Bulawayo. In the Soviet Union, by contrast, 'you could go anywhere – there was no segregation'.⁶⁸ Interactions with ordinary Soviet citizens, for whom black people were often an unusual oddity, could nevertheless be uncomfortable. Mazinyane recalled how,

you're coming from a country that is predominantly black, then you go there, you're not used to being a minority. You get into a metro, an underground tube, everybody is looking at you. Then, in Moscow, there were people, they'd never seen a black person. These people would do certain things, you'd feel it was racialism, but these people were curious. They'd want to touch your skin, to touch your hair, to ask how you live in Africa, all those things.⁶⁹

63 Interview with Mazinyane, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014.

64 Interview with Dabengwa, Bulawayo, 13 December 2014.

65 Interview with Mazinyane, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014.

66 *Ibid.* Also see Alexander and McGregor, 'War Stories', p. 89.

67 See Nkomo, *Between the Hammer and the Anvil*, p. 16.

68 Interview with Moyo, Bulawayo, 9 December 2014.

69 Interview with Mazinyane, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014.

Unsettling though they were, such approaches were often, over time, recast as the product of a benign interest. Moyo recalled:

the reactions towards us, we could understand ... We knew there were not blacks in the Soviet Union, unlike America and the UK, where our forefathers were taken as slaves ... So we were not even offended if we found people who wanted to see if we were human beings ... Some thought we were baboons ... but when they heard us greeting them in Russian they realised we were human beings.⁷⁰

Matiwaza described greatly enjoying his exceptional status on the Moscow excursions that he and his comrades embarked on outside their lectures:

you could go anywhere around Moscow and talk to anybody, going by myself or two or three of us. You know in those days, in the 1970s, black people were very few in Moscow so they were very much interested in you ... They'd ask if you were from Africa or America. They'd say, oh, how is Africa? It was very interesting. They'd take you as friends.⁷¹

Ronnie Patel, an Asian cadre who lived for many years in Moscow, underlined the contrast between the racism of recent times and his past experience: 'there is racism now, but not then – I can't remember a single incident'.⁷²

Many of our interviewees remembered with great warmth the genuine, often moving, sympathy they met when they identified themselves as freedom fighters, a category that made sense of their race and placed them in a particular political frame. Some dwelt on the welcome they received from hosts on visits away from training centres. Ncube affectionately recalled apple-picking on a co-operative in the Ukraine.⁷³ Dabengwa remembered a trip to visit agricultural co-operatives in Azerbaijan. They were run largely by women, who asked them what they were fighting for. When they explained,

some of them said, come on, forget about that. Smith has grabbed your country and he's not going to give it back to you. There are beautiful girls here – why don't you stay, stay here and get married! You're welcome into our co-operative! They were very kind to us, very nice. They wanted to make us as comfortable as possible.⁷⁴

Indeed, visits to co-operatives were singled out by all interviewees as a source of inspiration for their ambitions for a future Zimbabwe. They greatly impressed Dabengwa: 'that's why we said, when we get back home we must have co-operatives operating like these ones'.⁷⁵ Moyo came to the same conclusion. Co-operatives made sense to him:

those co-ops, they shared the means of production, tractors, whatever, so even when I grew up here as a small boy, we used to share the means of production, a hoe, span of oxen, scotch cart, wheelbarrow, and so on. So it was similar, but in an advanced stage.⁷⁶

These memories were not, of course, devoid of criticism in regard to both ideology and practice. Dabengwa, for example, was not convinced by what he saw as utopian aspects of communism. He explained,

we had a lot of arguments.... We ... said it out. We were very frank: we had misgivings about communism. Not from the propaganda we were reading about communism, but really looking at it and seeing how it could really come to a stage where they would say they have now achieved what they wanted to achieve under the communist system. Everyone is equal, that sort of thing, and there would be no need for policemen in that stage.... But that didn't seem realistic.

70 Interview with Moyo, Bulawayo, 9 December 2014.

71 Interview with Ncube, Bulawayo, 10 December 2014.

72 Interview with Ronnie Patel, Bulawayo, 14 December 2014.

73 Interview with Ncube, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014.

74 Interview with Dabengwa, Bulawayo, 13 December 2014.

75 Interviews with Dabengwa, Bulawayo, 13 December 2014; with Mazinyane, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014.

76 Interview with Moyo, Bulawayo, 9 December 2014.

Dabengwa had additional concerns about the applicability of the Soviet model of political organisation. He said that he had held that ZAPU should remain a mass movement rather than adopt the selective membership of the CPSU, and he felt that the demarcations between party, government and military had been insufficiently clear in the Soviet Union, a situation that could lead to abuses of power.⁷⁷ Many of our interviewees remembered having been aware of the levels of control and surveillance that existed in Soviet society. Some felt that this was to be expected in the context of intelligence training,⁷⁸ while others argued that ‘the social part’ of the Soviet model ‘was OK, but at the same time there was too much control. The USSR had the highest KGB presence. You didn’t know who the hell you were talking to’.⁷⁹

These sorts of criticisms tended to be magnified by the end of the Cold War and, in some cases, return visits to Russia. Our interviewees recounted how there were things ‘we didn’t see’ the first time around, such as the extent of restrictions on freedoms, the divisions and tensions among nationalities, the dissidents, who ‘were there, but we didn’t know them’.⁸⁰ Matiwaza recalled how he ‘used to admire socialism’, but had revised his opinion after the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁸¹

Their contemporary misgivings and later disillusionments notwithstanding, these ZAPU cadres’ accounts of their experiences of the USSR all described ways in which they had been profoundly and positively transformed. Patel felt that without his Soviet exposure he would have been ‘just another Indian with a business and making money’.⁸² Mpofo singled out his enduring commitment to ‘social justice’ as a legacy of his time in the USSR. As he put it, ‘we all need some equality somehow’.⁸³ Many of these men credited their Soviet training with giving them a ‘revolutionary vision’, which they contrasted to that of their nationalist leaders.⁸⁴

The lasting ability of episodes of Soviet training to shape lives is striking. In the case of these ZAPU cadres, the most powerful influences derived less from the classroom exegesis of ideology than from the myriad interactions with Soviet citizens and military instructors, their direct observation of life in the Soviet Union, and their understanding of the great sacrifices of Soviet history, all viewed through the lens of Rhodesia.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, let us return to the questions we raised at the outset. ZAPU intelligence cadres’ oral histories allow us to address some of these questions more fully than others. They underline the rich potential of oral sources to open up new areas of debate in a body of literature where their prior use has been scant. But at the same time, they highlight limitations such that many of our conclusions must for now be tentative.

Military training and the exposure to ‘living socialism’ and Soviet history certainly had powerful, lasting effects on our interviewees’ lives. Their accounts demonstrate the wide-ranging and sometimes surprising nature of exchanges that took place in a variety of venues and with a great mix of interlocutors, from urban citizens to members of agricultural co-operatives to veterans of the USSR’s Great Patriotic War. Visits to monuments and viewings of films left vivid impressions of Soviet sacrifice and heroism, and sat alongside the ideological lessons learned in classroom settings and more technically oriented military training. These varied

77 Interview with Dabengwa, Bulawayo, 13 December 2014.

78 Interview with Moyo, Bulawayo, 9 December 2014.

79 Interview with Patel, Bulawayo, 14 December 2014.

80 Interview with Moyo, Bulawayo, 9 December 2014. Also, interviews with Patel, Bulawayo, 14 December 2014; with Mazinyane, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014.

81 Interview with Matiwaza, Bulawayo, 10 December 2014.

82 Interview with Patel, Bulawayo, 14 December 2014.

83 Interview with Mpofo, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014.

84 Interview with Moyo, Bulawayo, 9 December 2014.

interactions take us beyond questions of how Soviet exposure influenced military and political strategy.⁸⁵ They also indicate just how difficult it is to trace genealogies of influence. The intelligence cadres whom we interviewed recounted a familiar ZAPU narrative that emphasized the movement's professionalism and autonomy, but they also revealed a bewildering array of influences accumulated over the course of the struggle, which included but went beyond Soviet teachings. These derived not only from repeated attempts to modify practices to suit the specificity of Rhodesian conditions but also from diverse experiences in Cuba and China, as well as in host countries all over the African continent, from Algeria and Ghana to the front line states of southern Africa.

When pressed to identify undiluted Soviet influences, our interviewees cited the use of titles such as 'commissar',⁸⁶ the role played by anti-aircraft weaponry, and the adoption of certain intelligence practices and devices.⁸⁷ They also singled out the idea of co-operative production. Co-operatives were instituted in the camps in Zambia, in guerrilla assembly points at the war's end, and in ZAPU-owned businesses and farms after 1980.⁸⁸ As we have seen, our interviewees' experience of Soviet agricultural co-operatives had been overwhelmingly positive. The adoption of co-operatives, however, like so much else, demanded an assessment of their suitability to Zimbabwean conditions. As Moyo put it, co-operatives were, 'the one thing we thought we should borrow from the Soviets, because it was similar to the African communal understanding of life, where means of production were shared'.⁸⁹

An evaluation of Soviet influence thus requires careful exploration of history, context and politics, including an understanding of how internal ZAPU politics intersected with outside support. Even where practices or ideas were adopted from Soviet sources, the reasons for and route of that adoption may have had little to do with any direct transfer of a particular 'model' or the application of a 'blueprint'. Our interviewees echo those authors who emphasise the varied interactions and influences of 'second world' support on a heterogeneous set of liberation movements, the political strategies and ideologies of which cannot be reduced to the binaries of the Cold War.⁹⁰

The ZAPU intelligence cadres' recollections that we have explored here do not provide anything like a fully realized exploration of social and cultural aspects of African military trainees' experiences of the Soviet Union. They do, however, diverge dramatically from accounts of African students in this era. Our interviewees' stories were strikingly positive. They carried no echo of the 'condescending paternalism' that Maxim Matusevich casts as central to African students' experiences,⁹¹ and not one of our interviewees complained of 'drab lifestyles [and] everyday regimentation'.⁹² This was in part due to the shorter, strategic nature of military intelligence training, the fact that 'regimentation' and surveillance were considered normal by soldiers, and the close connection between Soviet military support and ZAPU's ability to

85 On questions of strategy, see Brickhill, 'Daring to Storm the Heavens', and Dabengwa, 'Zipra'. They are keen to undermine accounts that give fodder to Rhodesian propaganda in which ZAPU is portrayed as a Cold War proxy for the USSR, and to claim for ZAPU the mantle of developing a unique insurgency strategy, incorporating the use of conventional forces. Compare to Shubin, 'Unsung Heroes', pp. 161–2, who seeks to give due credit to the work of the Soviet advisers who were involved in ZAPU's military planning from mid 1978 in Lusaka, and who played a substantial role in training ZAPU cadres in Angola alongside Cubans from mid 1977.

86 Interview with Mazinyane, Bulawayo, 11 December 2014.

87 Interview with Moyo, Bulawayo, 9 December 2014.

88 ZAPU established co-operatives under a programme called Operation SEED (Soldiers, Economic Employment and Development), and also embraced the idea of co-operatives as a means of development more widely. Interview with Moyo, Bulawayo, 9 December 2014.

89 Interview with Moyo, Bulawayo, 9 December 2014.

90 Slobodian (ed.), *Comrades of Color*, p. 4.

91 Matusevich, 'An Exotic Subversive', p. 57.

92 'The Plight of our Students in the USSR', *West African Pilot* (3 February 1964), cited in Matusevich, 'Probing the Limits', p. 24. See also Pugach, 'African Students'.

achieve its goals. These utilitarian considerations, combined with a strong belief in their own autonomy and choice, on the one hand, and an appreciation of Soviet history and society, on the other, left our interviewees with a powerful sense of gratitude towards their hosts.

These ZAPU cadres' accounts of Soviet training also underline the strong divergence between experiences in the USSR and in African host nations, where liberation movements themselves often dominated the institution of the 'camp'. More should be done to explore experiences in other countries beyond the African continent where substantial training took place, particularly Cuba and China, but also other Eastern-bloc countries. It none the less seems clear from our oral histories that Soviet experiences were unique in some ways. Our interviewees' narratives convey a sense of awe in the face of Soviet heroism in the Second World War, and Soviet technology – and even Soviet winters. They looked back with wonder at their warm embrace by a superpower advocating an alternative to western capitalism and expounding what seemed an unimaginably radical notion of 'equality'. They stressed the privilege of having had the opportunity to experience the Soviet Union at first hand. These soldiers' recollections shed new light on African encounters with the USSR that take us into a rich world of social exchange.

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