



## The Issue of the Rhodesian Bush War



At the beginning of the 1960s, British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, committed to the decolonisation of Britain's African colonies, on condition of their adoption of majority rule. Subsequent negotiation between the British government and the Rhodesian government was protracted, with the British requirement for any post-colonial settlement to have the support of the black majority being rejected repeatedly by the Rhodesian government, which feared a descent into bloodshed and anarchy, as had occurred in the recently independent Belgian colony of Congo. Throughout the process, relations soured, due to a refusal of British aid, a spat over the establishment of a Rhodesian mission in Portugal (at the time still an active Colonial power, governing neighbouring Mozambique) The Rhodesian cabinet, led by Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith and mostly drawn from the 5% white minority, settled the dispute by signing the Unilateral Declaration of Independence, breaking from British authority. When this was denounced as treasonous by the region's Colonial Governor, he was dismissed and replaced with a Rhodesian official, marking a clean break with London.

Rhodesia was widely censured in the immediate aftermath of the break, with a UN General Assembly passing a resolution calling upon the British government to end the rebellion, with 107 votes in favour, and just two – Portugal and South Africa, voting against. France, tied down in a colonial conflict in Algeria, abstained. While the Rhodesian economy was sustained by trade with



neighbouring Portuguese Mozambique and South Africa, abroad it suffered from a lack of recognition, as well as a British embargo enforced by a naval blockade, itself sanctioned by the UN Security Council. This was soon followed by the first mandatory sanctions in the UN's history, under Security Council Resolutions 232 and 253.

Beginning in 1964, and escalating throughout the UDI and its aftermath, was a conflict between the Rhodesian government and the armed wings of the ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union) and the ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People's Union), the Soviet-backed ZANLA (Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army) and the Chinese-backed ZIPRA (Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army). While both anti-government, and both supported by communist nations, ZANLA and ZIPRA fought an internal civil war, both intent on gaining control of Rhodesia after the fall of Ian Smith's government. In addition, ZANLA had close ties with FRELIMO, the independence movement in neighbouring Portuguese Mozambique. Both movements operated from bases in neighbouring nations, with ZANLA infiltrating from bases in Mozambique and Zambia, while ZIPRA came from Zambia and Botswana. The war is mostly fought as a counter-insurgency, with the Rhodesian forces sweeping the country for guerrillas. In return, the guerrillas destroy infrastructure, lay mines on roads and assassinate white civilians. While South Africa and the Portuguese government in Mozambique provide active military support and assistance, ZANLA and their partners, FRELIMO, have succeeded in setting up numerous outposts and bases in the border region between Mozambique and Rhodesia. Should the Portuguese colonial empire collapse, Rhodesia would be faced with an existential threat on three borders, making external support for itself and its regional allies a key Rhodesian goal.

In terms of perspective, the Rhodesian government saw itself as the defenders of not just the white minority, but also the black majority, against the radical, destabilising communist insurrectionaries. While the Rhodesian military was mostly led by white officers, and the core of the army was comprised of white personnel, large numbers of coloured men enlisted, and formed the bulk of the country's reserve forces, which, due to the lack of front lines, saw considerable combat. Rhodesia's only allies are Portugal and South Africa, which also face the threat of black communist insurgency. The ZANLA, supported by the Soviet Union, and the ZIPRA, backed by the People's Republic of China, both claim to be the true voice of the people of Zimbabwe, and reflect the Sino-Soviet split by occasionally fighting each other. The West initially sought to punish the Rhodesian government, seeing it as a racist, neo-colonial rump state. However, the demands of the Cold War have recently pushed the US Congress into re-opening trade links with Rhodesia, despite popular outcry. With proxy wars in full swing in Indochina, the Middle East, South America and elsewhere in Africa, the problem of Rhodesia presents a clash between morals and pragmatism.