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Zimbabwe Women Writers, eds. *Women of Resilience: The Voices of Women Ex-Combatants.* Harare: Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000. xiv + 193 pp. ISBN 978-0-7974-2002-1.

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Zimbabwean "war veterans"–people who picked up this phrase from recent reports of BBC, CNN and the like may be advised to sit down and review, before reading this book, the turbulent political history of Zimbabwe in the past thirty years, and the changing semantics of "freedom fighter" and "war veteran" in those years. The book is a collection of the stories told by nine Zimbabwean women, mostly ex-combatants, about their war (and postcolonial) experiences, and as such it requires from readers a background knowledge of the subject. The interviews were conducted by members of the Zimbabwe Women Writers, apparently in the mid- and late 1990s. Although gender-conscious literature on Zimbabwe's liberation war has recently been on the increase, this is the first, and perhaps long overdue, major attempt to record and publicize the voices of women guerrillas and supporters.

In retrospect, Zimbabwe's path towards independence was one of the most bloody and tortuous ones in Africa. By the early 1970s the confrontation between the Africans and the European minority regime culminated in a war. The Nationalist forces, represented by PF-ZAPU and ZANU (PF), built their military bases in Zambia and Mozambique, from which they engaged in a guerrilla war. The fighting was intensified in the mid-1970s and ended at the end of 1979, when a compromise was made between the Nationalists, Britain and the Rhodesians. This led to the end of the British colonial rule, and the establishment of a Black majority government in 1980.

The nine women here were all involved in the above liberation war. Among these women was Marevasei Kachere, a daughter of a peasant farmer in Uzumba, Murewa (the north-eastern part of the country). She joined the war at the age of about 15. By that time, which was around 1976, she and other villagers had been forced to live in a keep (protected village) by the Rhodesian government. Together with her friends, she fled the keep and went to Mozambique, where she stayed in Mubhanana camp, and then in Zhangara camp, and was eventually transferred to Tembwe camp (on the northern banks of the Zambezi). At Tembwe she received military training, while experiencing the Rhodesian raid of November 1977 in which she was badly wounded. With the completion of training at Maroro, Kachere was tasked to carry arms to the 'comrades' in the front. She entered the Mutoko area in July 1978, being involved in various actions. The cease-fire at the end of 1979 resulted in her transfer from Chimoio to Goromonzi Assembly Point, and to Manyene (a base for women fighters). With a poor educational background, she could not find a job, and her attendance at dressmaking and other skill training courses did not help. Meanwhile, she married and came to live in Karoi, but the union did not last long. She went back home with her three children, now living as a communal farmer. Kachere's career gives us an idea of what kind of experience the book highlights. The women tell us what made them to join (or support) the war, what life in guerrilla (or refugee) camps was like, how they outlived fighting, what difficulties they faced after independence, and how they now feel about the events they and the country underwent.

As people come to assay the country's post-independence achievements, the erstwhile picture of the liberation war, a rather simple, didactic, and Nationalist one, is being increasingly challenged and replaced by a more complex and 'realistic' one. A new set of questions have been asked and explored; the delicate relations between the guerrillas and the rural masses, and between the Nationalists and the trade unionists, contradictions between and within the Nationalist parties, and the position of ordinary soldiers, as against leaders. This book adds yet another dimension–women's experience–to the trend, so helping us achieve a deeper understanding of the war. The editors of the book are emphatic: 'women tend to explore, perhaps naively, the underbelly of the war, the small unpleasant details of the day-to-day horrors, and consider their capacity for endurance'. The book, indeed, reveals the often-neglected, not glori-

ous aspects of the war–hunger, makeshift shelters, horrible toilets, fleas, disease, suspicion, internal violence, friends' deaths, missing family, gender inequality, sexual harassments, etc.

Yet, generalization should not be carried too far. The stories collected are mostly extempore answers in interview (except one), neither political discourses, nor well-prepared analyses. They are in many ways colored by impressions and feelings, with the stated ideas full of ambiguities–as is usually the case with the stories of this nature. Thus, the women are inclined to take pride in what they did, but their pride is mixed with, and in some cases overwhelmed by, a sense of bitterness–'I would never recommend my daughter to follow my example if such a situation arose again' (Kachere, p. 191). More than that, the women's perspectives are often at variance among themselves. This should not surprise us, given the diverse careers and political affiliations of those people, including from a then member of parliament, a high ranking army officer, and a successful businesswoman to a 'humble' communal farmer. The point is apparent, for instance, in that the accounts of Maureen Moyo and, to a lesser extent, Prudence Uriri are punctuated by references to 'forced relationships' by males, whereas others remain silent over, or relatively indifferent to, such an issue.

The editors of the book conclude their introduction by noting: 'It is time for us to consider what a country would be like if the agenda and the priorities were governed by women: would war be a priority?' (p. xiii). To support this feminist argument, they quote a woman's remark: 'Whatever you are fighting for, in the end it's just a matter of removing one regime and replacing it with another similar regime' (Uriri, p. 93). But a question immediately arises as to how far the above remark is representative of those women's views. Mavis Nyathi would no doubt take objection to it, as she stresses the significance of the liberation struggle: 'It pains me when you see people castigating ex-combatants. People do not seem to realize the sacrifice that they made. Sacrificing their lives, leaving their parents, and going to fight for the liberation of the country is not a joke. It was a great sacrifice. … The thing is they [the ex-combatants] should not be depressed, because they sacrificed for a good cause …. Look at how many doctors there are now. I know people will say "I studied on my own, it was my brain and my parent's money that made me what I am", but just look at the era from 1979 backwards. How come there were not so many black doctors?' (p. 149).

A most striking theme that runs through these recollections is, to my mind, a tendency in which women are at pains to grasp and reconcile two different levels of life; of daily and political events, of pains and trauma, and ideals and high analysis, and of being female and being male. By being so they are perhaps trying to keep their balance and remain 'realistic' in a period of violent change.

Although this may not go with the postmodern way of thinking (which sees truth in language itself), the stories in the book ought to be considered 'narratives' concerning the crucial years of modern Zimbabwe. They are the 'materials' to be consulted and examined by us and by future generations. More stories of the same nature have to be collected and added to them. In this light, the book has a minor flaw, of failing to show the full details as to the method of interview. I am especially puzzled by the lack of information about the dates of interviews. As it is increasingly apparent in recent years, the discourse of democracy in the postcolonial Zimbabwe has been changing drastically. This makes us suspect that a story recorded in, say, 1995 cannot be the same in 2000, even if they are narrated by the same person.

Notes

For a better understanding of the subject, the following books might be useful:

[1]. I. R. R Mahamba, *Women in Struggle* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1986).

[2]. I. Staunton, comp. and ed., *Mothers of the Revolution* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1990).

[3]. N. J. Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War: Peasant Voices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[4]. N. Bhebe and T. Ranger, eds., *Soldiers in Zimbabwe's Liberation War*, vol. 1 and *Society in Zimbabwe's Liberation War*, vol. 2 (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1995).

[5]. J. Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better or Worse?-Women and ZANLA in Zimbabwe's Liberation Struggle* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2000).

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