

# ZPRA this, ZPRA that! Where are the Records to Prove ZPRA's Role in the Liberation Struggle in Zimbabwe?

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## Abstract

In the liberation of Zimbabwe, the contribution of two liberation fronts, the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZPRA) and the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), cannot be ignored. However, documentation relating to the contribution made by ZPRA in the liberation struggle is scarce. Future generations have to know and understand the role played by ZPRA; and thus, there is a need for memory in the form of documents to highlight the role and contribution of ZPRA. The ZPRA Trust has highlighted the need to document its role in the liberation of Zimbabwe. This study, therefore, sought to find out what documentation exists on ZPRA's contribution to the liberation of Zimbabwe, what documentation gaps exist on ZPRA's contribution to the liberation struggle, and how ZPRA intends to fill gaps in its archives or memory. It also sought to find out what challenges stand in ZPRA's way as it seeks to document its contribution to the liberation struggle, and where ZPRA's liberation documentation and archives are. The ZPRA Trust is the unit of analysis for this study; as it is responsible for the administration of ZPRA's affairs. This study was qualitative in nature, and a case study research design was applied. Purposive sampling was used as ZPRA cadres who lead the ZPRA Trust made up the population of the study.

**Keywords:** liberation cadres; liberation struggle; Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK); Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (Zanla); Zimbabwe African National Union (Zanu)

## Introduction

The history of Zimbabwe's liberation struggle is incomplete without mention of the immense contribution of two liberation fronts: the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZPRA) and the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA). These liberation fronts were key as armed wings of the Zimbabwe African People's Union



(ZAPU) and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) respectively. However, less is known about ZPRA's contribution to the liberation of the country as documentation to that effect is scarce. Future generations have to know and understand the role played by ZPRA and thus, there is a need for memory in the form of documents to highlight the role and contribution of ZPRA. The ZPRA Trust has highlighted the need to document its role in the liberation of Zimbabwe. Life is about remembering and forgetting, where there are phenomena that society wishes to hold on to and never let go, and others; which are but nightmares and everyone wishes to forget them. Various politicians, religious leaders, and others represent muted voices, which some interests will always want to suppress, whereas there are forces, which also advocate for the unmuting of such voices. Platt (2005, 181) highlights that it is disturbing to open up the settled past, but it is more disturbing to leave the past comfortably shrouded in amnesia. The loss of memory is greatly feared and conserving it has sustained a hidebound traditionalism in politics, and this has also been a weapon of liberation and a recognition of those who have been silenced or otherwise wronged (Booth 2006, ix). In politics there are many interpretations of reality and events—hence some voices are muted while others speak on their behalf; and in some cases, the muted voices refute the claims and “facts” presented by these other voices. Individuals and nations are seeking to overcome their traumatic legacies through the establishment of historical truth and the creation of collective memory (Christie 2000). Distorted facts usually cause rifts and resentment where parties whose facts are distorted cannot reconcile or unite with perpetrators. Blustein (2008, 167) highlights the need to tell the truth about what happened, to set the historical record straight. Without a true account of historical events, symbolic gestures in a country will appear to be primarily for the benefit of the dominant parties, a way of assuaging their guilt or shame, and may only compound the original offence and fuel resentment on the part of the posterity (Blustein 2008).

Records are therefore central to issues of national development, pride, identity and prestige and thus, they have to be managed appropriately for future generations. In almost all countries, liberation struggles are such key phenomena that cannot be forgotten. The Society of American Archivists (1990) states that recording information and finding ways to keep and use it for long periods of time are meant to fix knowledge in such a way that it can be called back to mind when necessary or desirable. Wars and liberation struggles are attached to various events that have to be commemorated, to cultivate patriotism and a sense of belonging; and thus it is of paramount importance that records related to such significant phases be made available to citizens. Butler (2009) highlights the need to create spaces of recognition, commemoration, mourning, transition, and hospitality. The archives of the past provide “contrapuntal” resources for this kind of alternative memory-work and for an “archival impulse” founded upon the acquisition and sustenance of both a “heritage dignity” and the “right to a remembered presence” (Butler 2009).

Zimbabwe's independence was achieved by a number of players, including ZPRA, yet the history of such groups has remained eclipsed and not fully made known. It is, therefore, critical that records of marginalised or muted voices, especially in regard to liberation

struggles, be captured and their voices heard, as this is part of the democratic process. The documentation of the history of marginalised groups' pasts, conceived as "hidden record," seeks to democratise the historical record, create an archive for the future and an alternative form of historical documentation (McEwan 2003). Muting certain voices in communities usually leads to disgruntlement and discomfort. Pappé (2004, xx) highlights that the violent symbolic and real exclusion of people from the hegemonic narrative of the past is the source of violence in the present. National pride and patriotism are hinged on a sense of belonging and it is the truth about the past which makes it possible for heroes to be honoured and celebrated.

## **Background**

Chitiyo and Rupiya (as quoted by Rupiya 2005) state, based on the post-1963 nationalist political divisions, that the ZAPU formed the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZPRA), while ZANU created the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA). It is on record that each of these liberation movements established elaborate political and military hierarchies, responsible for managing the armed struggle. The institutional evolution of ZAPU, including codifying the relationship between the party's political leadership and its armed wing (ZPRA), as well as establishing a coherent grand strategy with a clear and achievable military-political goal, was influenced by ZAPU Vice President J. Z. Moyo's "Our path to liberation", a strategy paper that Moyo presented to the party in 1976 (Rupiya 2005). Following the attainment of independence, the internal civil unrest, and finally the signing of the Unit Accord (1987), there was assimilation of ex-ZPRA elements into the Zimbabwe National Army. However, Brickhill (as quoted by Bhebhe and Ranger 1995) highlights that there were also losses to ZPRA's own self-image of a uniquely disciplined and rational army as their revolutionary history was now combined with, and made part of ZANLA, historically despised by ZIPRA for its indiscipline and adventurism (Ranger, n.d.). Clegg et al (2007) is of the view that ZANLA and ZPRA forces often fought each other as well as Rhodesian forces, and were supported by different indigenous communities.

Rupiya (2005) highlights that as ZPRA's institutional professionalism improved, the army's capability grew from "pure" guerrilla tactics with relatively small units, to include forces trained and armed with heavier calibre weapons aimed at, not merely attacking territory, but also seizing and holding it. Rupiya (2005, 247) further highlights that MK was also involved in external operations to support the ZPRA forces in Zimbabwe throughout the 1970s. However, ZPRA's exploits in the liberation struggle are not fully understood, as there is a scarcity of recorded information in that regard. Social exclusion of ZPRA's elements following the violence during the 1980s also contributed to the "forgotten heroes", that is ex-ZPRA guerrillas (Fry 2010). Interesting to note is that more than three decades into the independence of Zimbabwe, there has been a rise in voices calling for the documentation of ZPRA's history. Prominent among these voices and bodies is the ZPRA Trust, whose establishment was fuelled by the desire to record the history of ZPRA.

## **Research Methodology**

There is a scarcity of literature and documentation on the role played by ZPRA in the liberation struggle. Moreover, some historical accounts and narratives propagated by other historians and politicians have been dismissed as not true and distorting ZPRA's history.

## **Purpose of the Study**

This study sought to search the records generated by ZPRA as evidence of its legacy and contribution to the liberation struggle. Furthermore, it was of concern in this study to determine how ZPRA seeks to make its records accessible to the public.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The specific objectives of this study were to:

1. Establish where ZPRA's historical records were;
2. Determine what documentation gaps exist in ZPRA's history;
3. Establish how ZPRA intends to fill gaps in its history; and
4. Ascertain challenges that the ZPRA Trust may face in trying to capture their history.

## **Methodology**

This study applied a constructivist research paradigm and a qualitative research methodology. Furthermore, a qualitative case study research design was applied, the case being the ZPRA Trust. One focus group interview was conducted with three ZPRA Trust leaders and two other ex-ZPRA fighters. Two sampling methods were employed; that is, purposive sampling was used to select the three ZPRA Trust leaders who are engaged in the process of documenting the ZPRA history. On the day of conducting the focus group interview, two other ex-ZPRA fighters were coincidentally at the research site and were also interviewed—thus, convenience sampling was applied in that regard.

## **Data Presentation**

Data was presented thematically and the themes derived from the objectives of the study the findings of the study are presented in subsequent sections.

## **Communication Means during the Liberation Struggle**

During the liberation struggle, effective communication was crucial in order to gain ground—especially as ZPRA executed its guerrilla warfare. Research participants in this study were asked to shed some light on how communication channels were operated in ZPRA's structures during the liberation struggle. Respondents highlighted that whenever

an activity was carried out, for example, attacking the enemy's territory, a report was compiled by whoever executed the activity. Such reports were then sent to the ZPRA headquarters in Lusaka, Zambia, and were thus, part of the documentation of the armed wing. Respondents advised that messages were also being sent from the headquarters to officers working in the field. These messages were encrypted by cadres within ZPRA, whose specialisation was communications, so that should they be intercepted along the way, the enemy would not decipher them.

## **Documentation to Show ZPRA's Contribution to the Liberation Struggle**

It must be noted that historic series of events such as the liberation struggle are at the heartbeat of national prestige and glory; and thus, many will claim to have participated in liberating the country. Documents and other records, therefore, stand as evidence of activities, without which it becomes impossible to prove roles and claims to gains attained during such historic events as liberation struggles. Respondents were thus, asked to shed light on the presence of records that can stand as evidence of ZPRA's role in the liberation struggle. One of the respondents said that "currently, as the ZPRA Trust, we do not have records and or archives to that effect, neither do we have a centralised repository or museum which has documents belonging to the ZPRA Trust." However, it also emerged during the interview that "during the liberation struggle, as ZPRA we had records which we compiled and managed effectively and these records were very comprehensive and captured the role played by ZPRA, its mission, and its values during the liberation struggle."

The interview also revealed that after the liberation struggle of Zimbabwe, records possessed by ZPRA were confiscated by the post-colonial government, together with other ZAPU properties, and have never been given back. The researcher tried to establish whether these documents seized by government were still existent, or had been destroyed. Respondents indicated that they were not really sure of the fate of the records. They, however, believed that they had not yet been destroyed as, from time to time, they had witnessed state media broadcasting and publishing articles and information, which they believed, was derived from ZPRA documents. The respondents believed that some information could not have been found anywhere else—but in ZPRA records; and that this meant that these records had not yet been destroyed.

Respondents also said that their records were scattered in other countries: Zambia, Angola and South Africa—where some records, especially in pictorial form, were possessed by organisations like Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK). Respondents also related that some of these pictures had been transferred to Mafela Trust by MK.

## **Why the Need to Capture ZPRA's History Now?**

It has been 36 years since Zimbabwe attained independence from Britain and thus; it is prudent to want to know why the ZPRA Trust seeks only now to document its history.

Respondents were, therefore, asked why they had not documented their history in past years, and what had prompted them to pursue this cause now. One respondent replied that:

the political climate now is not as tense as it used to be in yesteryear. ZPRA was at some point considered as an enemy, and seeking to document its history then would have been interpreted as fighting government.

Respondents related that they believed that the time was now conducive, as they had also registered a Trust in the form of ZPRA Trust; and could legitimately seek to document their history. They added that the current demand for ZPRA's history was high as researchers, general citizens and others were now requesting records and ZPRA's history: not from history books, but from ZPRA itself. One of the respondents said that:

it is researchers like you and especially the young generation who want to know about ZPRA *from* ZPRA and not stories they have heard about from other sources.

Another respondent commented that:

people want to hear the truth from us as we have not spoken much in the past. People want to know, and this has made us to realise that now is the time to tell the truth and give a true reflection of the role played by ZPRA during the liberation struggle.

## **ZPRA's Documentation Gaps**

The need to capture ZPRA's history in more detail has been prompted by gaps identified by historians and the ZPRA community at large. The respondents were asked to shed light on what documentation gaps exist with regard to ZPRA's role in the liberation struggle. In response, one of the respondents quickly interjected to state that too many facts were distorted in some circles. He claimed that:

some circles want people to believe that ZPRA forces only fought in Matabeleland and Bulawayo and not other parts of Zimbabwe. This is not true – our forces fought all over Zimbabwe: in Matabeleland, Mashonaland, Midlands, and Manicaland; and for one to claim that we were more of a regional and not national force – it's not true.

The respondents, therefore, emphasised that such gaps, as evidenced in the accounts of some historians, politicians, and other sources, of the role played by ZPRA during the liberation struggle, need to be filled.

Respondents also stated that they needed to document ZPRA's legacy, how it was formed, organised, how it carried out its operations, how and where it fought. They also highlighted that their history and activities are best known to them; and that no one else can give a better or clearer account of ZPRA's history than ZPRA itself. One respondent also mentioned that:

there were activities which were successfully conducted by ZPRA forces but at some point other forces ... had claimed that they were the ones who conducted such activities, and this was a sign of gaps which needed to be filled to show what ZPRA achieved during the struggle, so that credit is given where it is due.

Respondents also claimed that some sources had distorted facts by claiming that ZPRA was not fighting, but just organising. They felt that such distortions needed to be straightened out and for people to see how ZPRA had fought by building from guerrilla warfare to conventional warfare, considering that this was more convenient and feasible than initiating directly with conventional warfare.

## **How ZPRA Trust Intends to Fill Documentation Gaps**

In order to tell its story or capture its history and make it accessible, ZPRA has to have a strategy on how to collect data, analyse it and make the findings accessible to the public. The interview revealed that the ZPRA Trust was established with the aim of capturing the history of ZPRA and its legacy. Such a move was, therefore, a positive development towards documentation of ZPRA's history. The researcher, therefore, wanted to find out how the ZPRA Trust intended to fill gaps in its documentation and capture its history. Respondents related that at some point the ZPRA Trust had requested its records, which had been seized by government; the government's response had been that they were supposed to go through a Member of Parliament (MP). That had proved to be a futile exercise, clearly intended to deter them from getting such records. Respondents noted that the MPs they could consult were Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) MPs, who were not interested, and as such matters were not of significance to them. Respondents also reported that they had recently requested a certain Colonel Ray Ncube, retired chairman of ZPRA, to present the case of ZPRA's properties and documents in parliament, which is an ongoing process.

Respondents also said that they were in the process of collaborating with a university in Zimbabwe in a bid to collect data and the history of ZPRA. They believed that the output of such an exercise would be the publication of a monograph detailing the contribution and structure of ZPRA during the liberation struggle. This study also revealed that there was a need to go to areas where ZPRA had fought and record accounts of those battles from living witnesses of such events. The plan was also to interview other ZPRA cadres in the country, as well as potential respondents who are now based in other countries, as well as to visit locations in countries such as Zambia, Angola, Algeria, and Russia, *inter alia*, where training or battles had been conducted. Respondents recalled that white colonial forces had followed ZPRA to bases in Angola and other countries; and there are accounts of battles there, which need to be recorded. It also emerged in this interview that the ZPRA Trust had approached the Bulawayo City Council, requesting land to construct a Museum that will be used to showcase ZPRA's history and legacy.

## **Challenges Anticipated by the ZPRA Trust in Seeking to Document its History**

Those seeking to capture ZPRA's history will arguably encounter challenges and glitches. Respondents were thus, asked to state some foreseeable challenges in their bid to capture the history of ZPRA. Respondents indicated that their rich history was displaced all over the country; and in other countries—and thus, a major challenge would be funding, as the Trust did not yet have funds to carry out such an exercise. They also related that many cadres had died over the intervening years, and thus with each passing day cadres who had participated in the struggle, and could have provided rich information, were being lost. One respondent said that:

All our cadres who trained in Algeria are “late” now, and only three of the cadres who trained in China are surviving, and if something is not done to capture their accounts, we will lose information if they pass on.

Furthermore, the respondents emphasised that it would have been better if their records, which were confiscated were returned, as this could save them time and resources.

## **Disadvantages of Not Having Documentation or Archives**

In its quest to document ZPRA's history, the ZPRA Trust has to consider disadvantages experienced by ZPRA over the years. The respondents were thus, asked to pinpoint drawbacks which, resulted in the absence of records to show ZPRA's contribution during the liberation struggle. One of these respondents highlighted that “not having records and or archives has injured our integrity and character because some people have distorted our history.” Furthermore, respondents highlighted another challenge by asserting that some “glorious” events and phenomena were subject to being claimed by different parties and that without records anyone could lay claim to having achieved things, which were rightfully attributable to ZPRA. They also noted that without records, researchers and future generations were deprived of a very important part of their history. Respondents highlighted that without an archive, ZPRA will pass into oblivion in the future as, once all the cadres have passed on, there would be no one to orate ZPRA's history to future generations.

## **Conclusion**

ZPRA's history is a significant part of the national history and identity of Zimbabwe as a country, and, therefore, has to be documented—and confiscated records need to be returned to the ZPRA Trust; as these records embody the country's heritage. Having gaps in the country's history and distorted facts about what ZPRA is and what it epitomises, is a serious issue, which needs serious attention. The will to capture ZPRA's history is there; and there is, therefore, a need to have resources that will enable the data to be collected from different areas in the country and beyond the country's borders. ZPRA had records, which were confiscated by government after independence. Such records will forever, remain a true



and authentic record, which was not specifically created for the sake of re-writing history, but which arose from actual transactions—hence their authenticity and integrity. The study concludes by asserting that the capturing of ZPRA’s history is long overdue; and that there is an urgent need to start capturing this history as some ZPRA cadres have passed away—and those remaining are ageing and ailing; and thus, their contribution to the history could soon be lost in the process.

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