

Heroes, Power, and the Politics of Memory: The 1977 Manama Secondary School Students Abduction in Zimbabwean Patriotic History



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ABSTRACT

Using the 1977 Manama students' abduction by ZIPRA guerrillas as a case study, this article discusses the politics of memory in Zimbabwean war historiography. Through analysis of oral testimonies, newspaper articles and secondary texts, the paper analysed how the incident has been remembered, manipulated, and portrayed in Zimbabwean nationalist and patriotic historiography. The study discovered that the Manama episode has fallen prey to the politics of memory as nationalist fervour collides with political agendas. While the nationalist and patriotic historiography frames the abduction incident in heroic and consensual terms, colonial and revisionist narratives, on the other hand, amplify aspects of coercion and deception. These conflicting versions expose tensions between collective memory, individual agency, and political expediency amidst an environment where political power largely shapes the liberation war historiography. The article argues that the presentation of the Manama incident in today's history reveals the broader abuse of war history by the ruling elite to mould heroes amongst the political elites and justify the regime's perpetual clinging to power. In this case, certain sacrifices are glorified, whilst others are obscured. Therefore, by focusing on the war experiences of the Manama abducted students, this study contributes to debates on memory politics, youths in armed struggles, and the contested meanings of heroism in postcolonial Zimbabwe. The article sheds more light on the intricate interplay between political power, war memories and the construction of historical truth.

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INTRODUCTION

The turn of the millennium witnessed an intensified revisionism of Zimbabwe's liberation war history, marked by deliberate distortions influenced by political agendas packaged as patriotic history. Historical narratives were strategically reshaped to serve mainly the Zimbabwe African National Union- Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) regime's interests, enabling the ruling elite to consolidate power by manipulating war memories.¹ As Kriger explains, it was convenient for the ZANU PF regime, particularly veterans of the struggle and nationalists, to use liberation struggle credentials to legitimate themselves and de-legitimate

¹ The nationalist and patriotic historiography has been greatly manipulated by politicians to justify their political dominance arguing that they fought for the independence of the country and therefore cannot allow others particularly the 'western' aligned opposition to rule. Blessing-Miles Tendi, *Making History in Mugabe's Zimbabwe: Politics, Intellectuals and the Media* (Peter Lang, 2010).

others in competition for power and resources.² The same strategy was also effective in outclassing the intensifying opposition, particularly from the Morgan Tsvangirai-led Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) that had shaken the Zimbabwean political landscape after its formation in 1999.³ Storytellers and writers capitalized on liberation war narratives to navigate political hierarchies of the ruling party, reinforcing state-sanctioned versions of history. As a result, stories of the liberation war were distorted and reinterpreted for personal glory and political expediency, particularly by the ZANU-PF government that manipulated Zimbabwe's liberation history in national politics.⁴ This reinterpretation and distortion of events packaged as patriotic history resulted in questionable and contested historical narratives. One such contested episode was the January 1977 abduction of students from Manama Secondary School by Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) forces.

The Manama abduction incident has been portrayed through conflicting narratives that reflect broader tensions in Zimbabwean war historiography. Some accounts, particularly from the post-independence state media such as *The Chronicle*, frame the event as a voluntary and heroic sacrifice by students in support of the liberation struggle, reinforcing a nationalist ideal.⁵ Conversely, the pre-independence state media and lately revisionist narratives, particularly from academics, highlight the victimhood of the abducted minors, emphasizing the forced conscription and the disruption of schooling.⁶ This paper examines the presentation of the 1977 Manama student abduction in the historiography of Zimbabwe's liberation struggle. It aims to expose the political instrumentalization of history to justify and legitimise the authority of the ruling elite. The study begins by reconstructing the Manama incident story through eyewitness testimonies, media representations, and secondary historical sources. Particular attention is given to the impact of post-independence politics in shaping the dominant narratives of the episode. By analysing interviews conducted by state media with former abducted students and examining historical texts, this paper highlights the distortions and selective memory that have been deployed to sustain political power in postcolonial Zimbabwe.

METHODOLOGY

The study was based mainly on an analysis of secondary sources, particularly colonial and postcolonial newspapers, as well as published books and journal articles that covered the Manama incident. Oral interviews with former students and ex guerrillas and the interrogation of archival sources complemented the secondary texts. This allowed the researchers to engage various narratives on the liberation war and unravel the untold stories of the victims of the war. Such an approach aligns well with a social history approach, which, according to Moloï, advocates for the democratisation of history by capturing the suppressed voices of the ordinary people. A combination of primary and secondary sources also enabled the researchers to rely on evidence-based analysis, thus countering the weaknesses of each historical source. For instance, the possibilities of bias in newspapers were countered by oral interviews or data from published books. As cautioned by John Tosh, oral sources need proof-checking to avoid exaggerations, selective memory and bias. The researchers, therefore, used newspapers and secondary sources to correct the weaknesses of oral sources.

Background of the 1977 Manama incident

The January 30, 1977, Abduction of Manama students is a significant event in the historiography of Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, illustrating both the mobilization and coercion of youths and minors in the war effort. The incident involved the abduction of over 400 students from Manama Secondary School, a Lutheran-run mission institution in southwest Rhodesia, by ZIPRA guerrillas. Among those taken were

² Norma Kriger, "From Patriotic Memories to 'Patriotic History' in Zimbabwe, 1990 – 2005," *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 6 (September 2006): 1151–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590600842472>.

³ Diane Thram, "Patriotic History and the Politicisation of Memory: Manipulation of Popular Music to Re-Invent the Liberation Struggle in Zimbabwe," *Critical Arts* 20, no. 2 (November 2006): 75–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02560040608540456>.

⁴ Blessing-Miles Tendi, "Patriotic History and Public Intellectuals Critical of Power," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 34, no. 2 (June 22, 2008): 379–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070802038041>.

⁵ M. Netsianda, "Manama Pupils Led Their Teacher to the Armed Struggle," *The Chronicle*, August 12, 2022.

⁶ "Terra Abduct 400 from Mission," *The Bulawayo Chronicle*, February 1, 1970; I Mazambani, "Did Children Matter?: Unprotected Children in 'Protected Villages' Created by the Rhodesian Regime during the Liberation Struggle for Zimbabwe" (Midlands State University, 2016), 90.

about 170 girls, 230 boys, three teachers, a school clerk, and a priest, all of whom were forcibly marched across the border into Botswana.⁷ Contemporary media, including *The Bulawayo Chronicle* and *The Washington Post*, documented the incident extensively, with accounts corroborated by survivors and school staff.

'Terra abduct 400 from Mission' screamed *The Bulawayo Chronicle* headline. The newsmen narrated that on 30 January 1977, a Sunday evening around 1900 hours, students at Manama secondary had gathered in the school hall for their routine prayers. Four to five 'Terra' appeared in the school hall and drove 170 girls and 230 boys across the border into Botswana, some 25 kilometres away.⁸ The abduction appears to have been well-coordinated, with guerrillas demonstrating precise knowledge of the school's schedule and security patrols. Oral testimonies indicate that some students had advance notice of the plan, suggesting that ZIPRA forces had established intelligence networks within the school.⁹ Accounts from abducted students, such as Lazarus Nyathi¹⁰ and Ephat Mashavira¹¹, suggest that discussions about the planned abduction had taken place before the school term resumed in 1977. Some students, including Ephat Mashavira, reportedly withheld their tuition fees in anticipation of joining the liberation struggle.¹² This is also ricocheted by Bhebe's discovery that the abduction was swift because some of the ZIPRA guerrillas involved, such as Moses *alias* Dube, came from the nearby Gungwe Mission.¹³ Therefore, such guerrillas could execute the task expeditiously, considering that they were familiar with the terrain, the local Basotho people and their language. Narratives of the Manama incident are, however, not uniform, as both the abducted students and secondary sources offer narrations with different interpretations. To date, the abduction incident remains a contested historical event, reflecting the broader struggle over memory, political legitimacy, and the role of youths in the liberation war.

Conflicting Narratives and Historical Interpretations

There are generally three broad narratives on the 1977 Manama students' abduction incident. The first storyline is particularly from the nationalist and patriotic historians, and postcolonial state media, such as *The Chronicle* newspaper. These emphasize the voluntary participation of Manama students, portraying them as active agents in the nationalist cause.¹⁴ The second perspective advanced by historians such as Ngwabi Bhebe acknowledges the forcible and wrongful abduction of Manama students, the majority of whom were mostly minors.¹⁵ However, emphasis was put on the heroic benefits as opposed to the negativity of the incident to the abductee. Both perspectives are heroic narratives that align with Zimbabwe's post-independence nationalist and patriotic history, which glorifies students' involvement as part of the broader liberation struggle. On the other hand, the third view was advanced by colonial historians and has continued to gain traction amongst historians with a revisionist perspective. These historians, including Tanya Lyons and Ishmael Mazambani amplify the negative effects of the abduction and abuse of minors during the liberation war.¹⁶ Their storylines emphasise the victimhood of the abducted students, explaining that not all students collaborated with the abductors at Manama. Instead, they explain that some managed to hide, escape, or later returned to Rhodesia when the government sent buses to retrieve them from Botswana. By examining both contemporary sources and oral testimonies, this study discusses the narratives and contextualizes the complex realities of student involvement, shedding light on the intersection of political power, war narratives, and historical truth in Zimbabwe. Such an approach acknowledges and interrogates the role of the post-independence political landscape in shaping the historical memory of the liberation struggle.

⁷ "Terra Abduct 400 from Mission."

⁸ "Terra Abduct 400 from Mission."

⁹ Ephat Mashavira, (Former Manama Mission school student, 1977, ex-Zipra guerrilla), Cell phone interview with Author, 16 March 2023.

¹⁰ Lazarus Nyathi was one of the abducted students, He was in form two. See *The Sunday News*, 07 January 2018

¹¹ Mashavira, interview.

¹² Mashavira, interview.

¹³ N. Bhebe, *The Zapu and Zanu Guerrilla Warfare & the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1999), 170 - 171.

¹⁴ This is mainly reflected in newspaper interviews with former Manama students. See for example, *The Chronicle*, 12 August 2022, or *The Sunday News*, 07 January 2018.

¹⁵ Bhebe, *The Zapu and Zanu Guerrilla Warfare*, 170 -182.

¹⁶ Tanya Lyons, "Guns and Guerrilla Girls: Women in the Zimbabwean National Liberation Struggle" (University of Adelaide, 1999).

The Heroic Narrative

The heroic narrative of the liberation struggle of Zimbabwe has its origins in the academic discourse where pioneer historians, including Ranger and Bhebe, took a nationalist stance and popularised the argument of voluntary civilian participation in the war. Historians, such as Alexander, McGregor, Ranger and Manungo have similarly argued that civilians in the liberation war of Zimbabwe were brave and politically committed to cooperate with guerrillas.¹⁷ This perspective constructs a heroic narrative that venerates liberation war participants as selfless volunteers driven by patriotic duty. Such accounts tend to highlight the valorous actions of these individuals while downplaying the more complex, negative, or mundane aspects of the war experience. In the Manama case, the heroic narrative in most cases portrays the abduction of students as a recruitment exercise where students consented and volunteered to join guerrilla forces. Bhebe, for example, describes the incident as dramatic and labels it as one of the most successful ZIPRA recruitment exercises in the liberation war history.¹⁸ This portrayal reflects a broader trend in nationalist historiography, demonstrated by the glorification of such incidents while obscuring the elements of coercion and deception employed by ZIPRA forces. Even where the use of force and deception was acknowledged, it was downplayed and portrayed as necessary for the fulfilment of the broader liberation struggle agenda. As one interviewee explained, the ZIPRA recruitment policies were against the use of force and recruiting school children and minors; however, the Manama incident was welcomed with jubilation in the ranks of ZIPRA because it brought in the most needed smart recruits at a time when they were needed most.¹⁹ In a way, this demonstrates that in this incident, the ZIPRA forces rationalized the ends, not the means. It is such a mindset that incubated the heroic narrative of the Manama incident in the liberation war historiography. Writers and storytellers became preoccupied with hero-making and proving the significance of certain incidents and individuals in the history of the liberation war, regardless of the negative realities of the experiences.

The post-independence state-controlled media, particularly *The Chronicle* and *The Sunday News*, have also been instrumental in shaping the epic narrative in the broader nationalist and patriotic historiography. According to Ranger, patriotic history in Zimbabwe is propagated at many levels, including national television, state-controlled press; in youth militia camps; in new school history courses and textbooks; in books written by cabinet ministers; in speeches by ZANU PF politicians and in philosophical eulogies and glosses of those speeches by Zimbabwe's media controllers such as Tafataona Mahoso.²⁰ This is also echoed by Thram, who explains that Jonathan Moyo²¹ propagandised patriotic history through song lyrics and televised propaganda videos that appropriated the music of the liberation struggle as a way to amplify the heroic deeds of guerrilla combatants of the struggle and justify the ruling ZANU PF party's grip on political power.²² In the same vein, state-controlled newspapers alongside the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) on its visual, digital, and audio platforms have consistently framed the abducted Manama students as youthful revolutionaries rather than victims. Almost all post-independent interviews conducted by *The Chronicle* and *Sunday News* with former Manama students highlight the students' courage and ideological commitment, while deliberately excluding the voices of those who attempted to escape from the abductors or later returned to Rhodesia. For example, in interviews published in *The Sunday News* (January 7, 2018) and *The Chronicle* (August 12, 2022), Lazarus Nyathi and Obert Matshalaga emphasized the heroic nature of the incident, deliberately avoiding the term "abduction" in favour of describing it as a ZIPRA recruitment process.²³ Even the framing of the newspaper headlines on the incident revealed an agenda to popularise the epic nature of the experiences.

¹⁷ Jocelyn Alexander, Joann McGregor, and Terence O. Ranger, *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the Dark Forests of Matabeleland, Zimbabwe (Social History of Africa)* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000); Kenneth Dzutsumwa Manungo, "The Role Peasants Played in the Zimbabwe War of Liberation, with Special Emphasis on Chiweshe District" (Ohio University, 1991).

¹⁸ Bhebe, *The Zapu and Zanu Guerrilla Warfare*, 177.

¹⁹ Magwizi, Willie Baster (an ex-ZIPRA guerrilla who operated in the Nyamhande and Manama area between 1977 and 1978) Cell phone interview with B. Hove, 28 July 2022.

²⁰ Terence Ranger, "Nationalist Historiography, Patriotic History and the History of the Nation: The Struggle over the Past in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30, no. 2 (June 2004): 215–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305707042000215338>.

²¹ Jonathan Moyo was a ZANU PF member and Minister of information and publicity from 2000 to 2005 and again from 2013 to 2015.

²² Thram, 'Patriotic history and the politicisation of memory,' 75.

²³ V. Dube, "Lest We Forget: Manama 'abduction' Relived," *Sunday News*, January 7, 2018; Netsianda, "Manama Pupils Led Their Teacher to the Armed Struggle."

For instance, one headline from *The Chronicle* read, ‘Manama pupils led their teacher to the armed struggle’.²⁴

This headline insinuates the voluntarism of the incident, negating the abduction and forceful nature of the process. Even where the newspapers mention abduction, the term was put in quotes to demean its impact. The Sunday News, for example, had an article titled, ‘Lest we forget: Manama ‘abduction’ relieved’.²⁵ The quotes on the word ‘abduction’ deliberately give a tone to the story, and in this case, it was meant to glorify the abduction process in line with the state sanctioned patriotic historiography. It is also not a coincidence that the state media did not entertain those students who ran away from the abduction process. Such indications illustrate how political influences shape war memories, reinforcing the abuse of the patriotic historiography promoted by ZANU-PF. These amplifications can be explained within the contexts and influences of patriotic history, which according to Ranger, resulted in overstatements as many were searching for political space within the ruling ZANU PF party.²⁶ The alignment of some of the former Manama abductees, such as Obert Matshalaga,²⁷ with the ZANU-PF leadership at the time of these interviews further demonstrates how political interests continue to reshape and reinterpret the nationalist narrative of the past to align with the ruling party’s. However, it will be an injustice to totally deny the existence of voluntarism amongst the Manama students. As Chennells puts it, Rhodesian Security Forces (RSF) communiques claimed that the students had been forcibly abducted, but foreign journalists interviewing the children in Francistown had the impression that many, if not the majority, had gone voluntarily.²⁸ This indicates the existence of voluntarism amongst students, though largely exaggerated within the patriotic historiography.

In addition to the state media, the heroic version of the Manama incident is also very much amplified by testimony from the former students who, in some cases, do not seek to be left out of the war history. Former students, such as Ephat Mashavira and Lazarus Nyathi, acknowledged having prior knowledge of the abduction. Mashavira argues that he had known the ZIPRA plan because it was hinted at in the previous term, and when he went to school in January 1977, he avoided paying tuition fees because he knew what was to happen.²⁹ He further mentions that when they were interviewed in Botswana and asked whether they wanted to go back home or to war, the majority argued that they wanted to go to war.³⁰ Even though he highlighted the use of deception and intimidation by the ZIPRA forces on the abductees, he did not regret his participation. Similarly, Lazarus Nyathi, who also claims to have been part of the mobilised students at Manama before the abductions, corroborate Mashavira’s account.³¹ Their emphasis on heroism, and association with the triumphant liberation narrative often overshadow the trauma they endured. This underscores how political power can shape and selectively curate war memories.

The frame of the Manama incident as an act of heroism serves several political and ideological functions. First, it aligns with the state’s broader narrative of glorifying participants in the liberation war, ensuring that stories of youth participation are remembered as examples of patriotic sacrifice rather than forced conscription. Second, it reinforces the idea that the struggle for Zimbabwe’s independence was a collective effort that included not only trained guerrillas but also ordinary students, teachers, and civilians who willingly took up the cause. Furthermore, by depicting the Manama students as active participants rather than passive victims, this narrative minimizes discussions on the ethical complexities of child involvement in armed conflict. It shifts the focus from the methods used by liberation movements to recruit and mobilize youths to an idealised portrayal of revolutionary consciousness, where even teenagers are presented as fully aware agents of historical change. The absence of dissenting voices, such as those of Taurai, Lamundi Ndlovu and the Mboyi boy who resisted or regretted their involvement, further illustrates how the construction of liberation war narratives remains politically charged in post-independence

²⁴ Dube, “Lest We Forget: Manama ‘abduction’ Relieved”; Netsianda, “Manama Pupils Led Their Teacher to the Armed Struggle.”

²⁵ Netsianda, “Manama Pupils Led Their Teacher to the Armed Struggle.”

²⁶ Ranger, “Nationalist Historiography, Patriotic History and the History of the Nation: The Struggle over the Past in Zimbabwe.”

²⁷ At the time of interview Obert Matshalaga was a senior member of ZANU PF. He also served as a member of the House of Assembly and deputy minister from 2005 to 2013. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/obert-matshalaga-4b315146/?originalSubdomain=zw>

²⁸ A. J. Chennells, “Essay Review: The Treatment of the Rhodesian War in Recent Rhodesian Novels,” *Zambezia* 5, no. 2 (1977): 182.

²⁹ Mashavira, interview.

³⁰ Mashavira, interview.

³¹ Dube, “Lest We Forget: Manama ‘abduction’ Relieved’.”

Zimbabwe.³² Ultimately, the heroic interpretation of the Manama incident reflects the ongoing politicization of war memory, where historical events are selectively framed to support nationalist legitimacy and the ruling party's ideological dominance.

The Victim Narrative

Although the heroic narrative of the January 1977 Manama incident largely portrays students as willing participants in the liberation struggle, an alternative perspective frames the event as a case of forced conscription, emphasizing the coercive tactics employed by ZIPRA guerrilla forces. This victim narrative highlights the lack of agency among many of the abducted students, positioning them as unwilling participants and minors who were forcefully removed from their educational environment and thrust into the war against their will. Even where consent was acknowledged, the narrative emphasises the use of lies, deception and intimidation by the abductors to win the hearts and minds of the students. The pre-independence state media and some revisionist views from scholars that include Mazambani and Hove emphasise that force, coercion and deception were widely used in abducting the Manama students in 1977.³³

During the liberation war, pre-independence Rhodesian state media, including *The Rhodesian Herald* and *The Bulawayo Chronicle*, swiftly framed the Manama incident as an act of abduction perpetrated by ZIPRA terrorists.³⁴ *The Bulawayo Chronicle*, in particular, devoted extensive coverage to the event, consistently emphasizing the coercive nature of the abductions and the emotional toll on affected parties, including the students, their parents, the Lutheran Church, and other stakeholders. One article featured images of grieving parents, while another reported that fifteen of the abducted students had allegedly been killed in Zambia while attempting to escape.³⁵ The colonial media across its platforms referred to the guerrillas as terrorists, thus emphasising the negativity of their activities.³⁶ In contrast, the post-independence media heroized those 'terrorist', demonstrating the influence of political power and the media in shaping history. Although some of the reports from the colonial media contained factual elements, Hove argues that these colonial-era newspapers served as propaganda tools for the Rhodesian government; therefore, they sought to delegitimize the liberation movements by portraying them as violent, lawless, and oppressive forces that victimized civilians, including schoolchildren.³⁷ Headlines such as "Terrs Abduct 400 from Mission" sensationalized the event, reinforcing the Rhodesian regime's broader narrative that African guerrilla movements relied on coercion and terror rather than voluntary support.³⁸ This representation of the Manama incident in colonial media stands in stark contrast to its portrayal in post-independence narratives, revealing the extent to which political agendas shape the historical memory of the liberation war.

Although accounts that depicted the negative aspects of the Manama students' abduction incident were shaped by Rhodesian propaganda, elements of the forced recruitment narrative were later corroborated by some of the abducted students themselves. Eyewitness testimonies from former Manama students, such as Chiratidzo Mavuwa, indicate that not all students embraced their conscription into the war effort.³⁹ Some students hid in classrooms, toilets, or ran away when the guerrillas arrived, demonstrating their fear and unwillingness to participate. Reynolds described the scene in the play area at Manama Secondary school on the day of the abduction as a sad reminder of the abduction since the St

³² Bhebe, *The Zapu and Zanu Guerrilla Warfare & the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe*, 175; Lyons, "Guns and Guerrilla Girls: Women in the Zimbabwean National Liberation Struggle," 112.

³³ "Terrs Abduct 400 from Mission"; Mazambani, "Did Children Matter?: Unprotected Children in 'Protected Villages' Created by the Rhodesian Regime during the Liberation Struggle for Zimbabwe"; Baldwin Hove, "The Role of Students in the Liberation Struggle of Zimbabwe: A Case of Christian Missionary Secondary Boarding School Students in South West Zimbabwe, c.1966–1979" (University of Free State, 2024).

³⁴ "Terrs Abduct 400 from Mission."

³⁵ '15 Manama students murdered in Zambia', *The Bulawayo Chronicle* 1 March 1977.

³⁶ In some cases the word terrorist was shortened to 'Terrs'. "Terrs Abduct 400 from Mission."

³⁷ Hove, "The Role of Students in the Liberation Struggle of Zimbabwe: A Case of Christian Missionary Secondary Boarding School Students in South West Zimbabwe, c.1966–1979."

³⁸ For the abduction story see 'Terrs abduct 400 from Mission', *The Bulawayo Chronicle*, 1 February 1977

³⁹ Chiratidzo Iris Mabuwa, former Manama Mission School student abducted in 1977, interview by Bhebe N., History Seminar Room, University of Zimbabwe, September 11, 1987. Bhebe, *The Zapu and Zanu Guerrilla Warfare & the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe*, 104.

Albert's mission incident.⁴⁰ Chiratidzo, who was a 14-year-old girl student, and her sister had their pleas to be excused from the abduction ignored by the ZIPRA guerrillas.⁴¹ Taurai, one of the abducted students, expressed her reluctance to participate in the war. She explained that she was not interested in joining the liberation war because she was comfortable with the status quo and her family was economically stable.⁴² Other students, such as the Mboyi brother, were taken against their will but remained uninterested in the war and eventually returned to Rhodesia when the government sent buses to retrieve them from Botswana.⁴³ The non-homogeneity of the students' attitude towards the abduction supports Michael West's observation that there existed, in Rhodesia, a middle-class African society that had different needs from those of other Africans.⁴⁴ West's reflection also agrees well with Kriger's argument that guerrillas sometimes used coercion to force Africans into participation and submission because not all Africans shared the nationalists' vision.⁴⁵ Such scenarios, to a greater extent, highlight the socioeconomic diversity among Africans under Rhodesian rule and how such differences influenced their perceptions of the liberation war. It is such differences that are reflected in the conflicting war memories of the Manama incident, as some endeavour to influence past narratives in order to dominate the present and the future.

The diverse individual testimonies of the abducted students provide insight into the diverse reactions among the abducted students. Unlike the heroic narrative that presents the abducted students as largely eager revolutionaries, Taurai's account reveals that some students saw the guerrilla war as a disruption of their personal aspirations rather than a cause for which they were willing to die. Her testimony also aligns with broader scholarly critiques of Zimbabwe's liberation war historiography. Scholars such as Kriger, Lyons, Mazambani, and Nhongo-Simbanegavi have extensively documented the use of coercion and forced recruitment by liberation movements, arguing that guerrilla forces often compelled civilians, including minors, to join their ranks. These scholars highlight that although some fighters and supporters were genuinely committed to the nationalist cause, many were recruited under duress, often through intimidation, violence, or deception. Unfortunately, the politics of memory have resulted in the distortion of such war events, thus denying generations of the truth and even blocking a healing process for the abducted minors, which, according to Reynolds, is important in rehabilitating war victims and combatants.⁴⁶

The Manama abduction incident, to a greater extent, illustrates the traumatic experiences endured by civilians in the liberation war. It reflects the realities of guerrilla warfare, where coercion was a common recruitment strategy. Far from being willing participants, many of the students were forcibly taken from their classrooms and hostels by ZIPRA guerrillas, highlighting the coercive methods often used in guerrilla warfare. Contrary to the dominant heroic narrative that depicts students as volunteers in the war, the victim narrative underscores that these students were stripped of their agency, with no real opportunity to consent or resist. It is also clear from the incident and the liberation war historiography that guerrilla forces often targeted mission schools because they housed young, educated recruits who could be trained as soldiers, spies, or political mobilizers. The use of force and psychological pressure ensured that even those who may initially have resisted had little room for defiance. The very structure of mission schools, with students accustomed to discipline, routine, and hierarchy, made them ideal recruiting grounds. ZIPRA forces could manipulate school structures, such as prefects and student leaders, to exert influence over their peers. This was revealed in an interview with Ephant Mashavira when he said, "Claudius Mashavira, the Headboy, was my brother; Gracious Zimi was a prefect, and they maintained order in the group".⁴⁷ This approach is consistent with Kriger's argument that guerrilla movements often

⁴⁰ Munyaradzi Nyakudya, Lloyd Hazvineyi, and Munyaradzi Mushonga, "Reminiscences Of Zimbabwe's War Radio Broadcasters," in *Guerrilla Radios in Southern Africa* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2020), 121–36, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9798881810610.ch-007>.

⁴¹ Bhebe, *The Zapu and Zanu Guerrilla Warfare & the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe*, 173.

⁴² Lyons, "Guns and Guerrilla Girls: Women in the Zimbabwean National Liberation Struggle," 352.

⁴³ Bhebe, *The Zapu and Zanu Guerrilla Warfare & the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe*, 173.

⁴⁴ Michael O. West, *The Rise of an African Middle Class Colonial Zimbabwe, 1898–1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 13–15.

⁴⁵ Norma J. Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 88. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511895869>.

⁴⁶ Pamela Reynolds, "Children of Tribulation: The Need to Heal and the Means to Heal War Trauma," *Africa* 60, no. 1 (1990): 1–38, <https://doi.org/DOI:10.2307/1160425>.

⁴⁷ Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War*, 88.

relied on both force and local social structures to secure cooperation from civilians.⁴⁸ Acknowledging such testimony is essential in reconstructing a more balanced and humane account of the Manama incident that centres on the pain, fear, and loss suffered by the young victims. It also opens room for lessons on the significance of historical truth in rehabilitating war victims, particularly minors who, according to Reynolds, were greatly affected in the forced guerrilla recruitment processes.⁴⁹

The three perspectives on the Manama incident demonstrate the complexities and dangers of prioritising political expediency over historical truth. Each interpretation is framed to advance a certain agenda. The two nationalist versions emphasise the heroic participation of students in the liberation struggle, reinforcing patriotic narratives that align with the use of the war as political capital by the ZANU PF.⁵⁰ In contrast, the colonial and revisionist accounts emphasize the victimhood of abducted students, casting guerrilla forces in a negative light and exposing the ethical dilemmas of their wartime conduct. Therefore, while historical interpretations of events such as the 1977 Manama incident will inevitably be shaped, influenced, and manipulated by political interests, historians bear the responsibility of safeguarding historical truth for the benefit of both present and future generations.

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, the January 1977 abduction of Manama Secondary School students remains a deeply contested event in Zimbabwe's liberation war historiography, illustrating the complex intersections of history, power, and political memory. The conflicting narratives whereby students are presented as heroic volunteers, whilst, on the other hand, coercion and force are highlighted, demonstrate how historical events are manipulated to serve political agendas. The ruling ZANU-PF government has played a central role in shaping this history, crafting a nationalist and patriotic narrative that glorifies the involvement of youths in the liberation struggle while downplaying or omitting elements of coercion and victimhood. The heroic narrative, promoted by state-controlled media and patriotic historians, presents Manama students as willing revolutionaries, aligned with Zimbabwe's post-independence political ideology. However, first-hand testimonies and alternative historical interpretations highlight the nuances and contradictions within this account, revealing that not all students voluntarily joined the struggle. Many were taken against their will, illustrating the coercive strategies employed by liberation movements in their recruitment efforts. The victimhood perspective, although historically marginalized in Zimbabwe's dominant war historiography, challenges the patriotic history and offers a more complex understanding of the lived experiences of the abducted students. Ultimately, the Manama incident serves as a case study of how historical memory is shaped by political imperatives. The selective remembering and forgetting of war experiences reflect the broader dynamics of power and legitimacy in postcolonial Zimbabwe. A more balanced and critical approach to Zimbabwe's liberation history would provide a more accurate and inclusive historical narrative. By interrogating the political instrumentalization of war memories, scholars can challenge distortions and contribute to a more balanced and detailed understanding of Zimbabwe's past, free of partisan manipulation.

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⁴⁸ Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War*, 88.

⁴⁹ Reynolds, "Children of Tribulation: The Need to Heal and the Means to Heal War Trauma."

⁵⁰ For details on how ZANU PF use the liberation war for political capital, see Ranger, "Nationalist Historiography, Patriotic History and the History of the Nation; Tendi, "Patriotic History and Public Intellectuals Critical of Power.

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