



Death, denial and dissidents: white commercial farmers' discursive responses to mass violence in Zimbabwe, 1970-1980

Rory Pillosof

Dr Rory Pillosof, Department of Economics, University of the Free State, P O Box 339, Bloemfontein 9300; Email: PillosofR@ufs.ac.za; rorypilosof@gmail.com

First submission: 15 October 2014

Acceptance date: 25 February 2015

This article investigates how white farmers in Zimbabwe reacted to two violent episodes in Zimbabwe's recent history: the liberation war in the 1970s and the violence of Gukurahundi in the 1980s. The foregrounding of violence against white farmers by white farming representatives and mouthpieces in the 1980s was in direct contrast to the almost complete lack of acknowledgement of 'terrorist' casualties during the liberation war, and was a deliberate strategy on behalf of white farmers to recast themselves as an 'endangered' species that needed government protection. This article analyses how the discursive strategies of narrative violence changed for white farmers from the 1970s to the 1980s. The changing social and political contexts meant that white farmers had to adapt the tactics employed for narrating and discussing violence, with silencing and selective remembering as key components throughout this troubled period.

The liberation war in Zimbabwe (1973-1979) had a huge impact on the farming community as a whole. In terms of the immediate and physical realities, farmers were often on the front line of the conflict and were frequent targets for attacks by the guerrillas. Nearly 300 farmers and members of their families were killed during the war; this amounts to over 50% of white civilian casualties (Selby 2006: 78). While the physical threat was highly uneven, with the vast majority of farming deaths, attacks and desertions occurring in the outlying border regions, the threat of land expropriation espoused by the nationalist movements affected the entire community. These fears and concerns were a constant part of the farming community and were intensified by the arrival of independence across other parts of the continent. 'Memories' of Mau Mau were often evoked, as were those of violence against white settlers in Belgian Congo and Mozambique (Caute 1983: 289). With the increasing inevitability of the end of white rule by the late 1970s, the sense of trepidation became ever more apparent.

With the granting of independence and the arrival of majority rule in 1980, the avenues for expressing the fear of black rule became remarkably narrow. The public discourse morphed into one of hope, reconciliation and rejuvenation. This shift was facilitated by the reconciliatory approach of the new Prime Minister, Robert Mugabe, which stressed that there was little for white farmers to fear under his rule. White farming representatives grabbed the opportunity to side with government and cement a partnership that would ensure they retained their land, livelihoods and wealth. One of the most obvious changes in the resultant discourse from white farming representatives was the issue of violence and farming deaths. How these issues were talked of in the community in the 1970s was radically different to how they were addressed in the 1980s. Comparing these two historical periods offers the opportunity to understand how farmers and their institutions, in part, negotiated the shift from settler rule to independence and the changing nature of their relationship with the state. These two periods illustrate important changes in the ways in which the farming representatives negotiated space and the role that silencing and selective memory played therein. This article explores those shifts and investigates the silences and selective readings of events in the 1970s and 1980s that took place in the farming community. The changing social and political contexts meant that white farmers had to adapt the tactics employed for narrating and discussing violence. As such, this article explores the conspiracies of silence that developed around 'death' and 'security', and the partnerships pursued by, and pressures exerted on white farmers over this period. Ultimately, the white farming community's decisions and actions illustrate the survival mechanisms employed by elites in colonial and postcolonial settings.

1. Methodology and background to *The Farmer*

This article is based on a detailed reading of *The Farmer*. To supplement the findings in the magazine, I also interviewed key members of *The Farmer's* editorial board, members of its parent body, the Modern Farming Publications Trust (MFP Trust), and contributors to the magazine. The most notable of these were Michael Rook, who joined the editorial team of *The Farmer* in the 1970s and went on to become General Manager of MFP Trust; Felicity Wood, who began working for *The Farmer* in 1989 and became the editor in 1991, before becoming the Editorial Director in 1997, and Richard Winkfield, who contributed to the magazine for 16 years and was Trustee of the MFP Trust. These people provided a wealth of information on the organisation of *The Farmer*, the role of the Commercial Farmers' Union (CFU) in running the magazine, and how this policy evolved.¹ The CFU emerged from the Rhodesia National Farmers' Union (RNFU), which was formed in 1942. Its membership peaked at approximately 6 500 farmers in the 1970s; membership was compulsory under law for commercial farmers. In addition, the Union took levies on the produce of its members, which were invested in agribusinesses; the CFU was thus a powerful self-sufficient organisation (Bratton 1994: 14).

The Farmer's primary concern was to inform and speak for the white farming community.² Both before and after independence, the CFU believed that the magazine was read by important audiences outside the farming community, and in particular, government ministries and departments. Thus, the magazine was also used as a lobbying tool to speak to those audiences and promote the image and importance of white farmers.³ *The Farmer* was not the only agricultural periodical in Zimbabwe. There were two monthly periodicals dedicated to the tobacco and cattle industries: *Tobacco News* and *Cattle World*. The South African magazine, the *Farmer's Weekly*, was also very popular. While these publications attracted specific agricultural audiences, various aspects of *The Farmer* set it apart from the other magazines. First, it was broad and inclusive and sought to speak to the entire farming community rather than to various sectors. Secondly, and more importantly, *The Farmer* was published, for all intents and purposes, by the CFU and, therefore, carried the weight of the Union's history and role in Zimbabwe. Winkfield stated that *The Farmer* was the single most important implement of the CFU to pursue their goals and communicate with its constituency.⁴

1 For more detail on the history of *The Farmer* magazine and the methodologies employed in scrutinising this source, see the relevant sections in my book (Pilosof 2012: 67-76).

2 Correspondence with Michael Rook, 23 and 24 April 2009.

3 Correspondence with Rook.

4 Correspondence with Richard Winkfield, 1 October 2009.

The Farmer had a high level of circulation within the farming community. At the time of independence, every farmer received a free subscription to the magazine as part of their levies to the CFU. The CFU had approximately 5 000 members at that time and every commercial farmer had to be a member of the Union by law. Even more importantly, farmers actually read the magazine. A survey carried out by a CFU restructuring committee in 1995 showed that of a sample of just over 1 000 farmers (nearly a quarter of the white farming population), 96% reported that they read *The Farmer* regularly. With its main focus on issues of technical and expert advice, *The Farmer's* central concern was to inform its constituency on how to improve themselves and their situation with better farming methods. However, due to a lack of expertise in many of these areas covered, the magazine often faced a shortfall of such material.⁵ To offset these shortcomings and gaps, *The Farmer* found other ways to fill its pages. Issues such as land reform, drought management, labour relations and rights, security and safety concerns all featured heavily in the magazine. It had a healthy letters section and regularly printed feedback from the farming community at large.

Until 1982, the magazine was aligned with the Union in an official capacity. However, after independence, the CFU, conscious of the new political dynamics, sought to create some distance between the publication and itself. In 1982, the CFU established the MFP Trust to run the magazine in order to, at least on the face of it, create some form of separation. The MFP Trust was established to run the magazine ostensibly 'independently' of the CFU. But as Rook points out, the CFU still had a large degree of influence over the magazine.⁶ *The Farmer*, then, was not an independent magazine with a mandate to publish what it liked. It was essentially controlled and manipulated by the CFU. As a result, one can explore what the Union sanctioned or censored, as *The Farmer* was a primary vehicle for the CFU's voice (Pilosof 2012: 75-76). Finally, because the CFU's records and archives are currently in disarray and mainly inaccessible, *The Farmer* is one of the few sources left that allows researchers an extended and consolidated look at the Union and its voice.

2. Tactics of silence

Key to this article is the issue of silence, how it is used, what was silenced and what was employed to mask the silences presented. Various types of silences have been noted in the literature on silence, such as those regarding transitions, amnesty, political partnerships, coercions, and artistic licence. This article focuses

5 Correspondence with Felicity Wood, 1 October 2009.

6 Correspondence with Rook.

on political silences and what these reveal about the partnerships between the state and specific interest groups. During times of political instability or contestation, those seeking partnership with the ruling party or leadership often have to buy into (or at least appear to buy into) a reality presented by those in power, in order to secure protection, preference or recognition. Involved in this process is usually a concession to gloss over inconvenient truths that may limit or negatively impact on such a partnership. This silencing is selective and strategic, and illustrates the tactics employed by interest groups to secure alliances with those in power.

Winter (2010: 29) defines political silence as “the insurance policy people take to protect the given order, even at the cost of the truth”. In a sense, this could be renamed a ‘strategic silence’, where measures are taken to ensure that the partnership survives, despite events on the ground or the changing fortunes of either party. Of course, these silences will wear and shift over time as the context and fortunes shift and change, but what is important, is to understand the motives and function of the silence at the time of its happening. Godwin and Hancock (1996: 11) have stated:

There are considerable rewards for paying more attention to what [people] actually said and did. Their language, rituals, and symbols are fertile sources for their political culture [...] For, by exploring language [... historians] can draw conclusions about the level of [...] ignorance, political sensitivity, and sophistication [in any given society or group]. They might also locate deeper recesses where individuals and groups hid their fears and superstitions about the unknown [...] and [...] unknowable.

In exploring language, we must necessarily explore the silences that go with that and why some terms, phrases and justifications make it into public discourses and lexicons, while others do not or are hidden from sight.

Intricately linked with political silences are issues of conspiracy. A conspiracy implies a partnership, and a decision by two or more parties to employ a discourse or silence. A conspiracy of silence “whereby people collectively ignore something of which each one of them is personally aware (Zerubavel 2010: 32)”, is a chosen strategy and, I would argue, a necessary part of political partnerships in times of conflict and contestation. A chosen strategy to look away and present alternative reality relies on understanding that there is a need to counter, undermine or deny a set of events or happenings that threaten the powerbase of the rulers or the image and value of the lesser partner or interest group. The example of this article, which examines how the white farming community in Zimbabwe and its representatives narrated issues of violence directly before and after independence, shows how

the shifts in political context altered the discourses employed and the silences used to cement partnerships and ensure survival.

3. The liberation war: silencing death and violence

During the liberation war, the *Rhodesian Farmer* (as *The Farmer* was called before 1979) offered no direct coverage of the traumas experienced by the farming community during the guerrilla campaigns of the 1970s. While 'security concerns' were often raised in the magazine, the obvious fact that these 'concerns' were directly responsible for increasing numbers of farming deaths was not stated. The magazine maintained this denial consistently throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Reports of attacks on white farmers were conspicuous by their absence. Even when Pieter Johannes Andries Oberholzer, a farmer from Melsetter (Chimanimani), was stabbed to death at a roadblock ambush in 1964 (becoming the first white Rhodesian to be killed by African combatants since 1897), the *Rhodesian Farmer* made no mention of his death whatsoever (Grundy & Miller 1979: 137, Ranger 1997). Two more farmers were killed in 1966, but their deaths were not reported. From then until 1973, 'terrorists' killed no other farmers through guerrilla activity (Chennells 1996: 102). The starting point of the new campaign came on 21 December 1972, when guerrillas attacked Altena farm in Centenary. While no one was killed, those injured became the first white casualties of "the renewed guerrilla war" (Godwin & Hancock 1996: 86, McKenzie 1989: 192). From this point, there was an obvious "change from the sporadic, and militarily ineffectual, actions of the Sixties, to protracted armed struggle" (Martin & Johnston 1981: viii). The *Rhodesian Farmer* kept such events out of the magazine. Indeed, the only report of a farming death that was directly attributed to 'terrorist action' was that of Peter Purcell-Gilpin and his son Alastair in 1979 in a two-paragraph article.⁷

It must be stressed that this was not because farming deaths were uncommon. Over 270 members of the RNFU, or their families, were killed over this period. These figures do not represent farmers killed on active military duty, only those killed in ambushes on their farms or elsewhere (Selby 2006: 78). As McKenzie (1989: 257) points out, in the small tight-knit farming areas, the deaths of white farmers had significant impact: "In the small white rural community [...] the loss of a single life brought a new sense of urgency to security matters, and prompted organized agriculture to redouble its attempts to ensure farmers' safety from attack". Security concerns and the deaths of farmers were a key concern to the RNFU and the minority white government.

7 *The Farmer*, 9 March 1979: 3. Some of the material in this paper has appeared in my book (Pilosoff 2012: 121-134), with thanks to the publishers for permission to republish in this instance.

Why then did the magazine steadfastly refuse to directly acknowledge violence and death in the *Rhodesian Farmer*? One might have expected that white farmers would have wished to highlight their plight during the war with a great deal of vigour by publishing details of horrific deaths and atrocities carried out by 'savage' and 'cowardly' terrorists in the *Rhodesian Farmer*. The protection of a sympathetic government, one would imagine, would have given Modern Farming Publications, the publishers of the magazine run by the RNFU, the freedom to relate the ordeals of the community without fear of reprisal.

The reasons for this lack of coverage were directly related to wider white attitudes to the war itself, and white understandings of what was occurring in the 1970s. The 'liberation war' was never framed as such by white media, the *Rhodesian Farmer* included. As Chennells (1996: 104) noted:

The war, when it came, could not be a war; it could only be a rebellion which meant, in settler mythology, primitive space attempting to reabsorb civilized space, and it was as a battle against this reassertion of the primitive that the war was described and indeed fought. Their failure to understand what was happening around them was entirely predictable. Victims as they were of their own discourses, fostered over the years and kept ignorant by their media of developing ideologies among Black nationalists, the settlers [...] had few means of correctly analysing the situation in which they found themselves.

There was, therefore, a widespread and general misunderstanding of the war and the reasons for which it was fought. All black nationalists were tarred with the same brush in *The Rhodesian Farmer*, as foreign-trained and -influenced peasants who sought to sabotage the existing racial harmony in the country. There was no discussion or recognition of the war as a struggle for independence and there was no way that this could be permitted in white political discourse. For this reason, the *Rhodesian Farmer* sought to keep intact the image of farmers as resilient, determined masters of the land. Articles recounting their death and struggle would have countered this message. While the community could face 'security concerns', and lobby government to find solutions to those issues, the portrayal of death was transgressive, especially among such a small, isolated and identifiable group. 'Real farmers' did not 'die', and they especially did not die at the hands of inept and incompetent black peasants. Therefore, the magazine sought to negate, or at least soften, the impact of the war.

The settler government also sought to protect white farmers and keep them on the land. When atrocities did start to escalate after 1973, the government acted swiftly to offer farmers support in the form of the terrorist compensation bill and

a life assurance scheme for farmers.⁸ As the *Rhodesian Farmer* illustrated, this new scheme was directly tailored to cover the loss and damage under the banner of 'terrorism'. The RNFU also became responsible for administering farm security patrols with Police Reservists, thereby fostering closer links with the state. In 1973, the RNFU and the Ministry of Internal Affairs began implementing the Agric Alert radio scheme (McKenzie 1989: 200). Finally, in July 1974, the government announced an aid scheme to reimburse farmers for the installation of security measures on their farms in designated areas (McKenzie 1989: 212-3). Since the government and the RNFU were so keen to keep farmers on their land, publication of farming casualties would have had a negative impact on the morale of farmers and may have incited many more to leave their land. Whilst it is naïve to think that such stories would not have spread within the community regardless, by not making it a permanent feature of public expression, the farming magazine sought to keep the issue of violence confined.

The RNFU could not use the *Rhodesian Farmer* to portray the fragility of the farming community and its susceptibility to attack, and consequently images of violence and destruction were kept out of the magazine, as there was nothing to gain from employing such a strategy. In 1979, the magazine's publishers produced a 150-page hardcover book titled *The farmer at war*. At the same time, they released a special edition of *The Farmer*, incorporating Modern Farming Publications, also titled *The farmer at war*, a 92-page paperback in newsprint. The difference between these two publications reveals the processes of silencing and how different audiences were engaged with. The book version attempted to illustrate how dramatically the war affected the lives of white farmers and the sacrifices that white farmers had made to protect their land and livelihoods. It collected much of its material from the *Rhodesian Farmer*, but, as the title suggests, it was more concerned with the process of the war, its repercussions and was a record of the war produced right at its end. It championed the white farmers for what they had done for the country and for what they had to battle against:

The Zimbabwe Rhodesian farmer is at war. He is in the frontline of this conflict, a top 'soft target' for the externally-based, Communist-trained terrorists whose aim is to remove whites from the country and destroy their influence which in 89 short years has been the key to economic and social development unparalleled on the African continent (Grundy & Miller 1979: 13).

The pictures in the book further indicate the aim of the publication. Dead 'terrorists' were shown, as were 're-educated terrorists' and other images from the war. The book also included pictures of attacked homesteads, security forces

8 *Rhodesian Farmer*, 10 May 1973: 5, 24 May 1974: 9.

in action, refugees and prisoners, child victims of 'terrorist' attacks (innocent, defenceless white children could die, not adults), arms, dead cattle, voting in April 1978, and the celebrations of 'majority rule' at the formation of Zimbabwe-Rhodesia. The book was at once a call to arms, a lobbying for the defence of farmers and a white morale booster. The book also included a list of acknowledgements, where thanks are given to "The Rhodesia National Farmers Union (now the Commercial Farmers Union), Combined Operations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Information, National Tourist Board, BSAP magazine, *The Outpost*, [and] *The Herald*" (Grundy & Miller 1979: 145). Finally, the book concluded with a 'Roll of Honour' list of all the farmers killed by 'terrorists' during the 1960s and 1970s (this list includes nearly 300 farmers). By doing so, it expressed the impact and cost of the war far more than the *Rhodesian Farmer* ever had. It was a very different form of communication that allowed the deaths of farmers to be addressed. *The Farmer* version of this publication did not include the photos of any dead people, 'terrs', white farmers or otherwise. Neither did it include the acknowledgements or the 'Roll of Honour' list. Produced for a wider readership, the book version could be and was more explicit, whereas the magazine version, which was directed solely at the farming constituency, was more circumspect and did a great deal more to temper the effects of the war on the farming community.

The conspiracy of silence between the state and the farming union was that whites did not die during the war and that the state could protect and defend its white population. Each group was painfully aware of the limitations of the state and the issues that rural white communities faced. However, these could not be publicly admitted to, as they would undermine the image of white control and power. As outlined below, this refusal to acknowledge death and weakness shifted radically after independence, when new political realities and contexts meant that new strategies (and silences) need to be employed to ensure survival.

4. Independence and Gukurahundi: dissidents, death and denial

The coming of independence in 1980 radically altered the magazine's discourse and approach as well as that of the renamed Commercial Farmers' Union of Zimbabwe (CFU). With the election of the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), the farming community and the CFU found themselves under a black government. As Chennells (1996: 3) has commented, "'With Mugabe's victory at the polls both discourse and the Rhodesia which had produced it were simultaneously swept away'". The farming Union and its media had to find new ways to report on themselves and the state. The negotiation of interaction between farmers and government was fundamental to the creation of a new

discourse. In the event, this meant that the farming community was keen to do all it could to secure its place in the new national order. Violence and death again played a central role in this process. As the war ended and the new 'peaceful' era of independence began, white farmers had more to gain from reporting violence now than they ever did during the war.

The reconciliation extended to the whites after independence (including Ian Smith himself) was not extended to Mugabe's other political rivals, Joshua Nkomo and his party, the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). Tensions between the two men and parties, evident before the coming of independence, continued to ferment after independence, resulting in several armed skirmishes and deliberate manoeuvres by Mugabe to undermine and disenfranchise Nkomo and his party (Muzondidya 2009: 178-9). As a consequence, many parts of Matabeleland witnessed significant civil unrest and disobedience, as political and regional distrust, compounded by racial and ethnic tensions, intensified. Finally, in 1983, under the pretext that unrest in Matabeleland was caused by forces loyal to ZAPU who refused to accept the election results of 1980, Mugabe deployed the newly trained Fifth Brigade and other military units to quell the unrest. What followed was a wave of horrific violence that, from 1983 to 1986, left thousands dead, while many others were "tortured, assaulted or raped or had their property destroyed" (Phimister 2008: 200).⁹

Mugabe's reconciliatory appeals to the white farming community immediately after independence fostered a convenient partnership between government and the white farmers. This partnership remained intact during the 1980s, despite the violence that was wrought in Matabeleland. Some white farmers in Matabeleland found themselves the victims of 'dissident' attacks, in which significant numbers of white farmers were killed; in some areas, the numbers were higher than during the liberation war. For the farmers in the affected areas, it was as if the war had never ended, as they continued to live under the constant threat of violence and death. The disturbances, and the government's response, were concentrated in the south of the country and had a massive impact on white farmers in Matabeleland and the Midlands. Farmers were caught in the crossfire between state actors and 'dissident' forces. Their unforeseen acceptance by the ZANU-PF government meant that they were now part of the new national project. The CFU took on its 'national' responsibility and endeavoured to ensure that positive messages of its support for the new government and their actions were expressed. This was done on numerous occasions and in various forms of print, as the farming community and the new government constantly reaffirmed

9 For more detail on the debate over how many were killed during Gukurahundi, see Scarnecchia 2011: 88.

the partnership between the two. However, the rise in dissident activity in the countryside after 1980 and the resulting deaths of white farmers meant that the Union found itself in the difficult position of advocating white farming rights and security, while seeking not to fracture its relationship with the new government. The CFU felt that its best course of action lay in fully aligning itself with ZANU-PF, regardless of the government's violent actions that became increasingly obvious as the 1980s progressed. Farmers and the CFU chose to remain silent on issues of state violence, but were prepared to talk about other forms of violence, as will be illustrated in more detail below. It must be remembered that white farmers were not alone in this chosen path. As Phimister (2008: 199-200) illustrated, national or international bodies raised few questions regarding the government's actions at this time, as the pursuit of racial reconciliation between black and white (epitomised by the government and farmer alliance) was viewed as far more important than the ethnic antagonisms of 'black-on-black' violence.

Throughout this period, the ZANU-PF state propaganda machine maintained that large numbers of roaming 'dissident' and 'rebel' forces were seeking to destabilise the country, posing a very real and significant threat to the fledgling democracy's sovereignty and integrity (CCJPZ 1997: 40-5). It is now widely accepted that such language and this framing of events had more to do with the political expediency of legitimating the scale of intrusion into the region than the actual threat. Nevertheless, in a region so affected by the transnational interplay of states and actors, there was more than an element of truth to ZANU-PF's claims (CCJPZ 1997: 30).¹⁰ While there certainly were rebel ZAPU elements, "the scale of the threat posed by dissident activity [...] was greatly exaggerated" (Phimister 2008: 198). Reports from the state-run news services frequently claimed that the rebels numbered up to 5 000, while the official government line was that there were around 1 000 heavily armed 'dissidents' in the country (CCJPZ 1997: 37). In fact, the dissidents probably numbered 400 at most. Furthermore, they had remarkably high desertion and attrition rates, due to the harsh conditions of their existence and the forces massed against them (CCJPZ 1997: 37).

Nevertheless, white farmers were often direct victims of 'dissident' activity. By 1987, rebel elements had killed over 50 white farmers and their families (Selby 2006: 170). The scale of violence and threat of attack experienced by farmers in these areas meant that they existed in circumstances similar to those they faced during the liberation war. This is illustrated in a report on conditions in Matabeleland, published in *The Farmer* in 1986. Under the title 'They need help', the article drew an obvious comparison to events of the war:

10 For alternative views, see Hanlon 1986, Martin & Johnston 1986.

Many farmers in other farming areas of the country have long since forgotten those dark days of the war and living under constant threat of attack. Thankfully those days are over [for most farmers] and farmers are able to concentrate on their essential occupations [...] Consider then the plight of Matabeleland farmers and their wives and families. [...] Spare a thought for farmers who still have to live like that.¹¹

Unsurprisingly, the events that so devastated the white farming communities in Matabeleland and Midlands, evoking memories of the liberation war, received a great deal of attention in *The Farmer*. However, there was a new tension to this coverage. During the 1970s, it had simply labelled all black nationalist activity as 'terrorist'. Now, with a black 'terrorist' government in charge, farmers and *The Farmer* had to find more nuanced ways of describing and reporting on events of rural violence. Thankfully for *The Farmer*, the government itself provided the new discourse on these elements that solved the problems of identification.

Immediately after independence, ZANU-PF began to disseminate anti-ZAPU and anti-ZIPRA (the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army, the armed wing of ZAPU) propaganda aimed at discrediting them as legitimate agents of national liberation. This involved labelling all crime and robberies in the Matabeleland region as the work of 'dissidents' and 'bandits'. It did not take long for links to be made between ZAPU and these 'dissident' elements. The CFU and *The Farmer* rapidly adopted these terms promoted by ZANU-PF. They allowed *The Farmer* to define any disturbances in these provinces as caused by 'dissidents'. While much of the reportage at this stage evoked memories and language of the liberation war, there was one crucial change to the coverage. *The Farmer* was now keen to publish stories about the deaths of white farmers. The first such farm murder to be reported in *The Farmer* was in March 1981. Four members of the Victoria East farming community (in the Masvingo province) had been gunned down in their homes that month and *The Farmer* outlined the CFU's deep concern at the loss of life and increasing lawlessness in the region. Although it was thought that the white farmers were killed by purely criminal elements, there were many references to the liberation war throughout the article. For instance, the killers were "armed with AK rifles - the standard weapon of guerrillas during the war". The article hazarded a guess that the "killers may have been guerrillas in the past". Clearly, events and memories of that time were still fresh in the minds of the farming community, as demonstrated in the concluding statement of *The Farmer* article: "Lawlessness has been discussed at Cabinet level [...] and] the

11 *The Farmer*, 10 March 1986: 10.

community must stay alert as it did during the war which claimed hundreds of farming lives".¹²

The next farm murder reported was a full year later in May 1982. Brian Dawe, a Chinhoyi cattle rancher (in Mashonaland West province) was reported to have been killed by "3 AK-waving 'dissidents'".¹³ In what was to become a common lament of the CFU and *The Farmer*, the 'security situation' was now said to be the gravest concern for the white farming community. It was made clear that "every representation on the matter that can be made has been made, including to the police and the National Army". While these first two attacks were outside of Matabeleland and the Midlands, the CFU and farmers labelled them as 'dissident' attacks. By this time, it was clear that white farmers had become key targets of the 'dissident' forces (Alexander 1998: 164, 168, Ranger 1999: 251). *The Farmer* now assigned all violence in Matabeleland and the Midlands to 'cowardly' dissidents and bandits.¹⁴ This shift of discourse responded positively to the government's explanation for the continued violence in the region. ZANU-PF's hostility to the dissident forces was such that *The Farmer* could use it to support white farmers' calls for protection by the new black government. The death of white farmers augmented such calls, and the magazine constantly highlighted the plight of white farmers in order to keep the pressure on government to protect them. The farming representatives could now use the death of white farmers in ways they could not during the liberation war. The national unity project depended on ZANU-PF defending the rights of its white and black citizens. Despite the fact that it was in the process of instigating a massive campaign of violence against the black population of Matabeleland, the ZANU-PF government went to great lengths to be seen to protect white farmers, thereby preserving the façade of racial unity and harmony in the country.

The most dramatic change in the discourse employed by *The Farmer* after 1980 was the entry of death and violence as substantial topics in the magazine. Farmers now had the space to legitimately claim the need for protection and defence. They were a fragile and highly susceptible group that needed constant affirmations of support from the new black government. This support was readily provided by the government, who realised that they could use the attacks on white farmers to further promote their control over Matabeleland.

In *The Farmer's* account of Dawe's murder, Mugabe's reaction to dissident-led attacks was published alongside those of the farming hierarchy: "I can assure you they [the dissidents] cannot escape the hand of justice. In due course we are going

12 *The Farmer*, 30 March 1981: 3.

13 This was the first murder, reported in *The Farmer* (10 May 1982: 9), to be attributed to 'dissident' activity.

14 *The Farmer*, 16 July 1984: 7.

to rid this region of these elements which are committed to banditry".¹⁵ *The Farmer* and the CFU adopted these positive assurances. Both portrayed the government as wholly motivated to quell the dissident threat. The vast majority of articles on the violence and killings in the region were accompanied by messages of support and acclaim for what *The Farmer* viewed as the government's evident commitment to resolving the security concerns in the region and restoring law and order.¹⁶ In an in-depth investigation into the region in 1983, *The Farmer* commented:

The police and 5 Brigade members that we saw were turned out in clean kit, looked fit and were well armed. However [...] the security forces are often handicapped by a reluctance of victims or witnesses to report the incidents [...] Government's heavy military commitment to the area leaves no doubt as to its intention to restore law and order.¹⁷

This understanding of government actions was in line with what the CFU leadership proclaimed at the time. For example, in 1984, CFU president John Laurie was quoted in *The Farmer*, stating that, "The commercial farming sector is fully aligned with the government's fight for stability and law and order".¹⁸ As the violence continued, his successor as CFU president, Bobby Rutherford, reiterated this sentiment, confirming that "numerous meetings have taken place with ministers and members of the security forces, and I wish to assure you [the farmers] of their concern and their determination to see an end to the harassment and unwarranted loss of life".¹⁹

The security forces were lauded for their efforts in eradicating the dissident threat. For example, when security forces killed the 'notorious bandit' Gwesela in 1987, it was heralded as a great achievement:

The news that Gwesela [...] has at last been killed has come as a great relief to many people, not least the people whom he and his gang have terrorised over the last few years. Farmers, farm workers, officials, tribesmen have all been victims of his ruthless and inhuman acts. [...] It is good that ordinary people realise that there is nobody who is above the law and that criminals will be dealt with.²⁰

15 *The Farmer*, 10 May 1982: 9.

16 *The Farmer*, 25 February 1985: 5.

17 *The Farmer*, 25 April 1983: 5.

18 *The Farmer*, 27 February 1984: 7.

19 *The Farmer*, 3 September 1987: 7.

20 *The Farmer*, 26 November 1987: 1.

Such occurrences were reported with obvious relish in *The Farmer*, bringing with them a palpable sense of relief to the farming communities. After the killing, CFU branch chairman for the Midlands, Mr Klaas Folkersten, stated, "I think the farmers should congratulate the security forces – there is generally a feeling of relief in the area".²¹

However, there was a tension between the CFU and the reporting it sanctioned in *The Farmer*, and those affected by the violence. Despite *The Farmer's* focus on the issue, many farmers still felt that the magazine greatly underreported the extent of the violence. Regional newspapers often expressed much greater fear and weight to the happenings in Matabeleland. These publications gave affected farmers the space to deliver messages that were much more explicit about the violence. For example, the South African *Sunday Times* reported Mike Wood, "president of the Matabeleland branch of the all-white" CFU, who said, "this is the biggest crisis we have ever faced in the area".²² Others warned that, unless something was done to stop the dissident threat, "there will be another war in this part of the country".²³ Another report in the South African *The Star* had a white farmer saying:

Comparing the situation now to during the war, virtually all agree that things are now worse. [...] At least then you knew that if you got revved [attacked], there would be a reaction from the security forces or the farmers themselves. Now all you'll get will be some blundering around in the bush and 'Sorry, tracks lost', said one rancher [...]. The ideologically-indoctrinated Fifth and Sixth Brigades whose training was mainly the responsibility of North Korean trained instructors, are units which come in for the toughest criticism in the province. [...] Many farmers have experiences of verbal clashes with these soldiers, who seem to have an antipathy for whites. [...] Mr Wood said at Bulawayo that some units almost considered the farmers a hindrance. This attitude is completely unacceptable.²⁴

These white farmers' voices that were carried in external newspapers could be far more radical than what was reported in *The Farmer*, because they could question the actions of the government. *The Farmer* never provided such a space because, in order to foster closer ties with the government, it could never criticise its actions. As long as ZANU-PF protected farming interests, the magazine and

21 *The Farmer*, 26 November 1987: 3.

22 *Sunday Times*, 22 January 1984: 1.

23 *The Star*, 2 June 1983: 2.

24 *The Star*, 6 June 1984: 4.

the CFU could offer no alternative explanation for events in Matabeleland other than 'dissident violence', which the government was allegedly doing all it could to address.

On the few occasions when *The Farmer* did articulate concerns about government actions in Matabeleland, these primarily expressed dissatisfaction that the government was not doing enough to quell the so-called dissident threat. The first apparent dissention occurred in 1983 when, at the Cattle Congress of that year, *The Farmer* reported that, "in a heated debate on security, law and order, particularly in Matabeleland, government was accused of 'covering up' the true situation".²⁵ The 'cover-up' alluded to was that the situation was worse than was being reported on and that the government was not doing enough about it. Tellingly, the same report revealed the extent of the white farmers' awareness of government and Fifth Brigade activity in the region:

Mr Joubert [a farmer in the Bubue District, one of the worst affected areas] alleged that instead of hunting dissident gangs, troops are avoiding them. He claims that on several occasions, dissidents had ambushed Army personnel. Army units, said Mr Joubert would not attack gangs of more than 15 dissidents and often avoided contact with smaller groups. [...] Mr Joubert angrily criticised the lack of response by Army and Police to reported sightings and alleged Army and Police units on the ground lacked the will and motivation to counteract dissident activity.²⁶

In this same article, the drought affecting the country at this time was labelled as 'a holocaust', with no evident sense of irony or understanding of the broader context of events in the country at that time. This statement was a sad reflection of the empathy of white farmers and their ability to see the actual 'holocaust' that was being waged against Mugabe's political opponents. Numerous other reports followed a similar pattern, criticising only the scale and efficiency of government actions.

As *The Farmer* sought to balance its reportage and representation of the government, farm murders continued to mount. In August 1987, *The Farmer* reported that "well over 40" farmers or members of their families had been killed in Matabeleland and Midlands "since Independence at the hands of murderous dissidents".²⁷ A month later, John Norvall became the "50th [to lose his life] since 1980".²⁸ *The Farmer* gave details of the vast majority of these murders, including

25 *The Farmer*, 20 June 1983: 3.

26 *The Farmer*, 20 June 1983: 3.

27 *The Farmer*, 27 August 1987: 3.

28 *The Farmer*, 3 September 1987: 3.

a great deal of coverage on the murder of 16 missionaries near Esigodini, in Matabeleland.²⁹ Yet it was constrained by its desire to appease the government and stay on the right side of the political elite. As Rook, who was General Manager of MFP Trust, explained:

there was a policy of reconciliation during the 80's and a desire to play down events that would deter investment [...] The overriding interest seemed to be to pacify the government of the day that was at the time supporting large scale commercial agriculture.³⁰

This is evidenced by the magazine's lack of critical engagement with the government's role in the violence in the region. Despite the coverage of 'dissident' activity and other 'security concerns' in *The Farmer*, there was absolutely no mention of the mass violence carried out by the Fifth Brigade against the people of Matabeleland.

For the victims and survivors of Gukurahundi, statements such as 'the rule of law' and the 'cruel and inhuman acts' solely of the dissidents are totally incongruous with their experiences (Werbner 1991, 1996, 1998, Zhira 2004: 61-77). More than simply an isolated episode of 'tribal' violence, ZANU-PF's campaign in Matabeleland was a concerted and deliberate attempt to destroy the opposition's regional base. As such, it illustrated that ZANU-PF still operated much as it had done during the liberation war. It was still overwhelmingly "hierarchical and authoritarian", rather than democratic and inclusive. It was highly "militaristic, vertical, undemocratic, violent and repressive", and continued to conduct politics "through the barrel of a gun", a practice that became all too evident after 2000 and the rise of another viable opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) (Freeman 2005, Phimister 2008: 212).

The CFU and *The Farmer's* deliberate and complicit silence on the issue needs further explanation. Considering the extent of the government's operations in Matabeleland, it seems unlikely that farmers would not have had some indication as to what was taking place. As Mr Joubert's comments on the intricacies of Fifth Brigade movements mentioned earlier make clear, some white farmers had very detailed knowledge of events in the region. Yet *The Farmer* never confronted the issue. To understand why, Rook provides revealing retrospective arguments. With regard to the coverage of Gukurahundi, he claims that, "the extent of the deliberately motivated genocidal [*sic*] policies then being perpetrated by the 5th Brigade in Matabeleland were at the time successfully shaded by government

29 *The Farmer*, 3 December 1987: 1, 3.

30 Correspondence with Rook.

propaganda”.³¹ However, he admits that this was not the only reason for the circumspect reporting: “*The Farmer* then and later was sometimes subject to censorship by CFU. The degree of censorship was dependent on who was holding the Presidency at the time, and who was serving on the all[-]powerful Council”.³² During this time, Rutherford was one of the CFU presidents; the CFU Director at the time described him as “a card carrying political harlot, who spent more time with government than with his members” (Selby 2006: 177). Having survived the coming of majority rule, it is clear that the CFU wished to preserve its cosy relationship with the new government. Offering criticism of its approach in Matabeleland would have put that partnership in jeopardy, so the CFU muzzled *The Farmer* and forced it to toe the CFU and party line.

Changes in the political environment and context allowed for a new discourse to emerge in *The Farmer* after independence. With the threshold of black majority rule having been crossed, the CFU worked hard to secure a partnership with the new government. Part of this meant that white farmers could portray themselves as victims of the dissidents (unlike during the liberation war) and actively and publicly call on government for support and protection. As a result, although they understood the government’s actions and motivations in Matabeleland, white farmers chose to remain silent in order to protect their relationship with ZANU-PF. The political changes of independence had a massive impact on the discourses employed by the farming community. It gave them the tools to proclaim a victim status and seek protection from government. This victim association was not one they made or could make during the liberation war, as it would undermine the framing of the ‘bush war’ presented by the state and other white mouthpieces.

5. Conclusion

The silences of white farmers shifted dramatically from the early 1970s to the end of the 1980s. The change in political leadership played an immense part in this, as the white farming community had to adapt their way of engaging with the country’s leadership. During the liberation war and the years of Gukurahundi, the white farming community was actively engaged in *conspiracies of silence*, but with different motivations and outcomes. During the war, in order to protect their image as defenders of the land and that of the guerrilla armies as weak and inefficient, white farming deaths were unreported and omitted from public media. This strategy was endorsed by the white settler government, which sought to conceal the impact of war on white society as much as it could. After the war and

31 Correspondence with Rook.

32 Correspondence with Rook.

the coming to power of ZANU-PF, white farmers changed tactic and sought to get as much mileage out of continuing farm deaths in unsettled areas. Every death was reported and appeals were made to government to protect and defend white farmers. The farmers kept silent about the actions of government troops (and the Fifth Brigade, in particular) in Matabeleland and the violence they undertook, despite being obviously aware as to what was happening in those areas. At this stage, it was important to protect the relationship with the new black government and ensure that the partnership that developed allowed white farmers to stay on the land.

These silences, clearly survival tactics, that shifted as the need necessitated, illustrate how potent political relationships are in deciding what is talked about and what remains unsaid. During both periods of instability (the liberation war and Gukurahundi), farmers sought a partnership with the ruling party, and by so doing had to buy into a reality presented by those in power to secure protection, preference or recognition. Silencing, and the deliberate attempts to not recognise certain inconvenient truths, is selective and strategic and illustrates the tactics employed by interest groups to secure alliances with those in power. The changing social and political contexts before and after independence meant that white farmers had to adapt the tactics employed for narrating and discussing violence, with silencing and selective remembering being key components of the strategies employed. These strategic silences, representing conspiracies of silence, are a necessary part of political partnerships in times of conflict and contestation, and they show how interest groups such as the commercial farmers adapt and evolve in order to survive.

Bibliography

- ALEXANDER J (1998) Dissident perspectives on Zimbabwe's post-independence war. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 68(2): 151-82.
- BRATTON M (1994) Micro-democracy? The merger of farmers' unions in Zimbabwe. *Africa Studies Review* 37(1): 9-37.
- CATHOLIC COMMISSION FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE IN ZIMBABWE (CCJPZ) (1997) *Breaking the silence, building true peace: a report on the disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands 1980 to 1988*. Harare: Legal Resources Foundation.
- CAUTED (1983) *Under the skin: the death of white Rhodesia*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- CHENNELLS A (1996) Rhodesian discourse, Rhodesian novels and the Zimbabwe liberation war. In: Bhebe N and Ranger T (eds) *Society in Zimbabwe's liberation war*. Oxford: James Currey.
- FREEMAN L (2005) South Africa's Zimbabwe policy: unravelling the contradictions. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 32: 147-72.
- GODWIN P & HANCOCK I (1993) *'Rhodesians never die': the impact of war and political change on white Rhodesia, c. 1970-1980*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- GRUNDY T & MILLER B (1979) *The Farmer at war*. Salisbury: Modern Farming Publications Trust.
- HANLON J (1986) *Beggar your neighbours: apartheid power in Southern Africa*. London: James Currey.
- MARTIN D & JOHNSON P (1981) *The struggle for Zimbabwe: the Chimurenga war*. Harare: Faber and Faber.
- MARTIN D & JOHNSON P (eds) (1986) *Destructive engagement: Southern Africa at war*. Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House.
- MCKENZIE J A (1989) Commercial farmers in the governmental system of colonial Zimbabwe, 1963-1980. Unpubl PhD thesis. University of Zimbabwe, Harare.
- MUZONDIRIDYA J (2009) From buoyancy to crisis, 1980-1997. In: Raftopoulos B and Mlambo A (eds) *Becoming Zimbabwe*. Harare: Weaver Press.
- PHIMISTER I (2008) The making and meaning of the massacres in Matabeleland. *Development Dialogue* 50: 199-218.
- PILOSOF R (2012) *The unbearable whiteness of being: farmer's voices from Zimbabwe*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press.
- RANGER T (1997) Violence variously remembered: the killing of Pieter Oberholzer in July 1964. *History in Africa* 24: 273-86.
- RANGER T (1999) *Voices from the rocks: nature, culture and history in the Matopos Hills of Zimbabwe*. Oxford: James Currey.
- SCARNECCHIA T (2011) Rationalizing Gukurahundi: cold war and South African foreign relations with Zimbabwe, 1981-1983. *Kronos* 37: 87-103.

- SELBY A (2006). Commercial farmers and the state: interest group politics and land reform in Zimbabwe. Unpubl DPhil dissertation. University of Oxford, Oxford.
- WERBNER R (1991) *Tears of the dead: the social biography of an African family*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- WERBNER R (1996) In memory: a heritage of war in southwestern Zimbabwe. In: Bhebe N and Ranger T (eds) *Society in Zimbabwe's liberation war*. Oxford: James Currey.
- WERBNER R (1998) Smoke from the barrel of a gun: memory, postwar of the dead, and reinscription in Zimbabwe. In: Werbner R (ed) *Memory and the postcolony: African anthropology and the critique of power*. London: Zed Books.
- WINTER J (2010) Thinking about silence. In: Ben-Ze'ev, Ginio R and Winter J (eds) *Shadows of war: a social history of silence in the twentieth century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ZERUBAVEL, E (2010) The social sound of silence: toward a sociology of denial. In: Ben-Ze'ev, Ginio R and Winter J (eds) *Shadows of war: a social history of silence in the twentieth century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ZHIRA M (2004) Uncovering the reality of state violence in western Zimbabwe, 1982-1987. *Past Imperfect* 10: 61-77.