

## The Dyadic Intersection of Student Politics and Liberation Ideology: University Students in Zimbabwe's War of Liberation, c.1966–1979

### Abstract

The liberation of Zimbabwe from colonial rule was the result of collective efforts by various actors across the globe. However, the historiography of this struggle has predominantly emphasized the role of combatants engaged in direct military confrontation, thereby marginalizing the contributions of other social groups, such as students, whose activism played a role in advancing the path towards independence. Using resistance theory as an analytical framework, this study explores the complex relationship between university student politics and African nationalism in the struggle against colonial rule in Rhodesia from c.1966 to 1979. The analysis focuses on student activism at the University of Rhodesia (now the University of Zimbabwe), which was the only university in the country at the time. The study seeks to address two key questions: (1) What role did student politics play in shaping African nationalism during Zimbabwe's liberation struggle? and (2) How did student activism contribute to the broader anti-colonial resistance in Rhodesia? The findings illustrate that student politics, particularly among African students, was deeply intertwined with the ideology of African nationalism, which was rooted in the socio-political realities of marginalized African communities. The study argues that student political engagement functioned as a microcosm of the broader national political landscape of resistance to oppression, reflecting and reinforcing the dynamics of the liberation struggle

**Keywords:** *Student politics, liberation war, colonial rule, African nationalism, university of Rhodesia*

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## 1. Introduction and Background to the Study

This study explores the relationship between university student politics and African nationalism during the liberation war in Rhodesia, commonly referred to as the Second Chimurenga/Umvukela, from c.1966 to 1979. The analysis focuses on student activism at the then University of Rhodesia (now the University of Zimbabwe), the sole institution of higher learning in the country then. To contextualize the emergence of student activism within the broader political landscape, the paper begins by examining the nature of university student political engagement prior to 1966. This historical overview facilitates a comparative analysis between student activism in times of peace and its transformation during the armed struggle. A critical review of the existing literature on student politics in Rhodesia provides the foundation for the study's argument. The paper delineates the characteristics of student political engagement during the liberation war, illustrating how student activism was intricately linked to the broader ideological framework of African nationalism. It contends that university students were regarded as the intellectual vanguard of African society entrusted with both a philosophical and practical role in the nationalist movement. As Mlambo (1995) asserts, students at the University of Rhodesia constituted a highly active political constituency whose activities significantly influenced the course of the liberation struggle. Their involvement extended beyond the

university campus, as they engaged in intellectual discourse aimed at educating and mobilizing African communities in support of the war-effort. Moreover, the university campus itself became a site of political struggle, where demonstrations, strikes, stay-ins, sabotage, and espionage were orchestrated to undermine the colonial regime, while simultaneously advancing the objectives of African nationalism. This study critically examines these activities to elucidate their connection to the broader nationalist struggle and to assess the significance of the student constituency in Zimbabwe's liberation war. The analysis is guided by resistance theory, which frames student activism as a critical component of anti-colonial resistance in Rhodesia. By foregrounding this perspective, the paper highlights the often-overlooked contributions of student activists whom it terms "student warriors" to the decolonization process. Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to the historiography of Zimbabwe's liberation war by shedding light on the pivotal yet marginalized role of university students in the struggle for independence.

## 1. Resistance Theory and the Liberation Struggle in Zimbabwe

Resistance theory is a political philosophy that justified disobedience to an established authority in the event of an injustice. The theory has its roots in the Roman law (codified in Justinian's *Corpus Juris Civilis* 6th century). Canon law (the legal system of the Catholic Church) and medieval laws that gave individuals the right to defend themselves and their property (Parrow, 1993). Use of violence in self-defence or when resisting unlawful authority was justified. The 17<sup>th</sup> century religious wars that were concluded by the 1648 peace of Westphalia, were deemed just wars because the people had the moral ground to defend themselves (Clodfelter, 2017). The theory of just wars which justified resistance is linked to the works of medieval Theologians like St. Augustine (354 -430) and St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) who believed that the use of violence was moral in fighting injustice. A just war was fought only if, declared by a legitimate ruler, there is a just cause and there is a good intention like repelling evil as opposed to revenge.

The Dutch scholar and Jurist Hugo Grotius in his 1625 work *De Jure Belli ac Pacis* (The law of war and peace) argue that the individual had a right to resist injustice though society has a duty to regulate the resistance so as to avoid worse destruction (Parrow, 1993). John Locke in his *Second Treatise of Civil Government* (1690) also argues that violation of the social contract by the Ruler could lead to justified resistance. Harshman (2013) argues that resistance theory is grounded in Marxism, postmodernism, feminism, and post structuralism, and it provides perspective for the actions students take to participate in the political and social order of society that is replicated in schools. Resistance theory explains the politicised actions of individuals to oppose injustice and inequity related to class, gender, race, and sexuality. Therefore, the key tenants of resistance theory include the right to resist and right to self-defence with good cause, good intentions and aiming at restoration of justice.

The resistance theory help explain the activities of university students in the liberation war of Zimbabwe. This is because, in the eyes of the oppressed, the students had a right to resist in good cause and good intentions the oppressive colonial regime. The students resisted immoral acts like racism, inequality, and state brutality. Such immorality by the colonial regime was condemned by the oppressed community where the students came from thus justifying resistance. However, Resistance theorists argue that the moral and political acts of resistance that students engage in are too often misinterpreted and explained as misbehaviour (Harsham, 2013). Students and their affiliation groups tend to resist injustice in different ways that usually result in a brutal state response which further fuel the resistance. Therefore, the resistance theory legitimises left wing student politics and African nationalism during the liberation war. The theory helps in countering the colonial propaganda by removing the 'terrorist' tag the colonial regime attached to those fighting to liberate Zimbabwe.

## 2. Review of Related Literature

The role of university student activism in Zimbabwe's liberation war has received limited scholarly attention. Among the few scholars that have examined this subject are Hove, (2024), Hodgkinson (2019), Maposa and Mlambo (2016), Chung (2006), and Mlambo (1995). These scholars' explored students war memories in Rhodesia and also touched on student politics at the University of Rhodesia during the liberation struggle. A key theme that emerges from these studies is the recognition of students as active participants in nationalist politics, with their education being viewed as critical to the future leadership of an independent Zimbabwe.

Mlambo (1995), in his article, *Student Protest and State Reaction in Colonial Rhodesia: The 1973 Chimukwembe Student Demonstration at the University of Rhodesia*, concurs with Hodgkinson (2019) and Chung (2006) in asserting that university students played a significant role in the national liberation movement. Focusing on the 1973 Chimukwembe demonstration, Mlambo provides a detailed analysis of the causes, trajectories, and consequences of the protest. He describes the demonstration as one of the most violent student protests in the history of the University of Rhodesia, resulting in damages amounting to approximately \$7,000 – equivalent to roughly \$49,757.55 in today's currency. Mlambo's study provides valuable insights into the intersection between student activism and national politics because he explained that the 1973 demonstration articulated broader national grievances that include racial inequality and labor injustices. Those grievances aligned student activism with African's broader struggle against colonial rule. Mlambo further highlights that ZANU nationalists allegedly influenced the Witness Mangwende-led Students' Union to apply additional pressure on the colonial government for political reforms. However, it should be noted that Mlambo focused on a single demonstration, the Chimukwembe of 1973. This leaves a gap on other war-time activities which are covered in this study.

Hodgkinson (2019) expands the discussion on students' war-time activities by examining the role of student activism in shaping future political leaders within ZANU PF. His study focuses on three prominent figures namely Dzingai Mutumbuka, Simba Makoni, and Ranga Zinyemba. Those students viewed their university activism as a foundational experience that informed their nationalist ideology. Hodgkinson main argument is that student activism served as a springboard for emerging political elites to develop their ideological stance and leadership skills. This argument, supported by the war time activities of afore mentioned student activist, helps to explain the link between students' politics and liberation ideology which is the major focus of this paper. However, while Hodgkinson's study primarily examines individuals who later ascended to influential positions within ZANU PF, this study gives the ordinary university students a voice. The paper examines the broader student activities beyond the ruling party's elite. In a way, this study builds upon Hodgkinson's work however, it goes a step further by incorporating the experiences of students who may not have attained high political office but were nonetheless instrumental in the liberation struggle.

Chung (2006), in *Reliving the Second Chimurenga: Memories from the Liberation Struggle in Zimbabwe*, offers a personal narrative of her experiences as a student at the University of Rhodesia, a teacher in African townships, and a participant in the liberation movement. Chung's study was treasured in this research because it provides a unique gendered perspective that details the racial and social divisions within the university and the broader society. This is so because unlike Mlambo and Hodgkinson, Chung sheds light on the experiences of women in the struggle, addressing issues such as sexual violence against young women within guerrilla camps, an aspect often overlooked in mainstream nationalist historiography. Chung's account reinforces Kriger's (1992) argument that African grievances during the liberation war were not homogeneous but shaped by diverse social, economic, and gendered experiences. That argument helps in understanding that students' war activities were never uniform as they were affected by various factors that include gender and student's individual backgrounds. However, unlike Chung who detailed her personal experience as a student at university, this study endeavours to detail the experiences of various students during the course of the liberation war.

Maposa and Mlambo (2016) provided a theological reflection on the dynamics of student activism at the University of Rhodesia from 1965 to 1980. They articulated the participation of students in demonstrations and other protests at the university explaining the link with African nationalism. Their major argument is that university of Rhodesia students were strategic actors in the liberation war. That argument resonates well with the nationalist and patriotic historiography that presents Africans heroic contributions to the struggle (see Ranger 2004, Tendi 2010). This greatly aided this study in identifying the major heroic activities of students at the University of Rhodesia. For instance, the students' demonstrations against the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) declared in 1965. However, whilst Maposa and Mlambo (2016) took a theological perspective and focused on heroic activism, this study went a step further. It added the common off campus students' activities that have been largely ignored in the existing historiography of war memories. This study also reflects the non-homogeneity of Black students at the university, a factor that has been ignored by Maposa and Mlambo, yet it greatly affected the students' participation in the liberation war.

Hove (2024) conducted an extensive primary source-based study on students' lived experiences during Zimbabwe's liberation struggle. His research explores the connection between university student activism and the political engagement of mission secondary school students. This is important in showing that university students' activities during the liberation war were not in isolation. Hove (2024) argues that university activism was intrinsically linked to secondary school activism, as many university students had previously attended mission schools and some later returned as teachers, thereby influencing the political consciousness of younger students. The case of Reuben Mqwayi who participated in protests both at Tegwani Mission School and at the University of Rhodesia in the 1970s was among other examples that were used to illustrate the interlink between secondary schools and university activism. While Hove's study is rich in primary evidence and provides valuable insights into the broader impact of university student activism on secondary schools, its primary focus was on mission school students in southwestern Rhodesia rather than university students themselves. University students' activities are only explained when they intersect with those of secondary school student. It therefore means a lot of detail about university students' war time memories was not covered. This paper addresses that gap by concentrating on university students' mundane and heroic contributions to the liberation struggle, offering a more focused examination of their role in the anti-colonial movement

Collectively, the works of Hove (2024), Hodgkinson (2019), Maposa and Mlambo (2016), Chung (2006), and Mlambo (1995) establish a foundation for understanding the role of student activism in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle. While these studies underscore the significance of student engagement in nationalist politics, they each exhibit certain limitations. Hove used university students war memories to explain the activities of secondary school students, Maposa and Mlambo present a theological and heroic perspective, Mlambo's focus is restricted to the Chimukwembe demonstration, Hodgkinson emphasizes elite student activists, and Chung provides a memory-based, gendered account. This paper extends their analyses by offering a more comprehensive examination of the relationship between student politics and African nationalism throughout the entire course of the liberation war. Unlike previous studies, this research considers the contributions of a wider spectrum of student activists, including those who did not ascend to elite political positions but nonetheless played crucial roles in the anti-colonial movement. To contextualize the discussion, the paper describes the nature of student politics in colonial Rhodesia before delving into the students' war time activities.

### **3. The Nature of Student Politics in Rhodesia**

Student politics in the liberation war of Zimbabwe cannot be discussed outside the macro politics of African nationalism that dominated the history of that period. Maposa and Mlambo (2016) explain that activism at the University of Rhodesia mirrored colonial melancholy in a critical way. This is because students' activities at the university contributed in shaping national politics given that

organised student politics was more visible in tertiary institutions with the University of Rhodesia at the pinnacle. Therefore, to understand the causes and nature of student activism at the University of Rhodesia during that period one has to understand the national politics of the day that had a direct influence on the politics of education shaped by racial inequalities. It should be pointed out that students at the University of Rhodesia were not a homogeneous social category. Race, financial privilege, gender and social status stratified the university student populace to an extent that politics of identity had a bearing on campus activism. As Michael West (2002) argues that Africans had different needs, the grievances and demands from the privileged students were at times different and clashed with those from the underprivileged. Outside the University campus, communities were also divided along racial, economic and political lines such that the stratification at the university mirrored the situation in the country as a whole. Students, therefore, identified themselves with groupings of similar characteristics in the country. This section will briefly describe the two major forms of student activism that existed at the University of Rhodesia campus to contextualise the nature of student activism in the country in general and at the university in particular. The context helps in visualising the environment from which students' activists operated in. This aids in explaining the moral justice behind student's activism in Rhodesia emphasised in the resistance theory thus answering the question on the significance of the students' activities in the liberation of Zimbabwe.

### 3.1 Right Wing Activism

Racial superiority partnered with social and economic status were amongst the major determinant factors that shaped students' behaviour at the University of Rhodesia. The white dominated student community were generally privileged, had financial muscles and were on top of the social status hierarchy. The majority of these students with financially sound backgrounds received the best primary and secondary education and their families were close to political power and decision making in the colony (Zvobgo 1981, Mlambo 1995). As such, the majority of this group of students had different and at times clashing grievances with the underprivileged students dominated by students of African descent. They despised what they termed the 'Africanisation' of the university and the mixed environment that exposed them to black and poor students (Chung 2006). They disliked the disruptive environment caused by African students demonstrating and at times destroying property. As Mlambo (1995) said that after the 1973 Chimukwembe demonstration, the racial tension at the University of Rhodesia increased as the white community was generally unsympathetic to the incarceration of the black dominated Students Representative Council (SRC). Mlambo added that though there were white students and staff that empathised with the cause of the Chimukwembe demonstrators, they were not committed to share the painful experiences the activists went through. Ndlovu (1974) also added that there were some white students in Rhodesia who participate in demonstrations organised by leftists, but these students rarely went further than the stage of peaceful protests. After the stage of protests, the white Rhodesian student could only encourage the Africans by giving them moral support and, in very exceptional cases, very clandestine material help in the form of finance for legal defence and other needs. Therefore, this group of white students, though not homogeneous, largely collaborated with the colonial regime since it favoured their privileges. Their activism was largely right wing.

### 3.2 Left Wing Activism

Unlike the white dominated privileged student community, the majority of black students at the University of Rhodesia were of poor financial backgrounds. These black students had made it to the top of the educational ladder through excellency and some through the help of donor funds and missionary education. This was because the Rhodesian government had a bottleneck system that underfunded native education (Summers 2006 and Zvobgo 1981). Such Black students identified themselves with the African peasant community who were at the bottom of the social status hierarchy in the country. The liberal university campus environment gave such students some degree of freedom that activated the desire to register their discontent with the colonial injustices not only at the

university but in the country as a whole. Considering the unjust colonial government policies that entrenched the disadvantaging of the Africa natives, the students from the unprivileged communities believed in resistance because to them it was a just fight which according to the resistance theory was morally right and acceptable. However, to the colonial regime, such activism was leftist and punishable. Hodgkinson (2019), Chung (2006) and Mlambo (1995) among many other scholars have documented accounts of such students being punished for engaging in activism. Therefore, it can be argued that leftist activism in Rhodesia and at the University of Rhodesia in particular was generally dominated by the black student community whose grievances resonated with those of the underprivileged African society in the country as a whole. This does not ignore the role and participation of some privileged community members, but as Ndlovu (1974) said, they rarely participated in active leftist activism to the fullest. This paper focuses on these leftist activists because they are the ones that resisted colonial injustices and shared a common identity and common cause with African nationalists who also spear headed the resistance to colonial rule. It is therefore prudent to highlight the African nationalist ideology in Rhodesia during the colonial era so as to contextualise the link with student activism. That setting serves to clarify the intersection of student politics and the fight against colonial rule.

#### **4. A History of Student Politics and African Nationalism in Rhodesia**

The historical relationship between student politics and African nationalism in Zimbabwe dates back to the early resistance to colonial rule in the late 19th century. The introduction of Western education played a transformative role in shaping African political consciousness, transitioning from traditional monarchic systems to Western democratic ideals. Summers (2002) and Zvobgo (1981) highlight that in the early 20th century, African students in schools and tertiary institutions found ways to express their grievances, laying the foundation for organized student activism in later decades. Education inadvertently produced politically conscious African elites, who not only challenged injustices within the education system but also played key roles in the development of trade unions and nationalist movements. Ranger (1968) notes that the rapid expansion of African education after World War II contributed to the rise of a more politically aware labour force, linking education to the emergence of trade unionism and mass nationalism. According to Mhike (2016), the mission educated had since the 1920s assumed the “young, educated Africans” status which made them role models with the power to influence change in the African society. This interconnection between student activism, labour movements, and nationalist politics became increasingly evident throughout the colonial period and was instrumental in mobilizing support for the liberation struggle. Formal education was influential in social and political mobility demonstrated by the fading of African traditional political systems and the emergence of a new social class of the educated elites taking over the political space in the 1920s onwards (Hove 2024). Leaders such as Joshua Nkomo, Robert Mugabe, and Reverend Douglas Samkange exemplify this transition, having emerged from educational institutions that exposed them to democratic ideals and resistance strategies. The Southern Rhodesia African National Congress (SRANC), regarded as the precursor to modern African nationalism in Rhodesia, was led by educated elites. Their leadership in subsequent political movements, such as the National Democratic Party (NDP), the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), further illustrates the critical role of education and student politics in shaping national political leadership.

##### **4.1 University Student Politics in the Liberation War**

The intersection of student politics and liberation ideology became particularly pronounced during the liberation war in Zimbabwe, as university students played an active role in resisting colonial rule through demonstrations, strikes, and mobilization efforts. Hodgkinson (2019), Maposa and Mlambo (2016), Gaidzanwa (1993), and Cheater (1991) agree that the activism of University of Rhodesia students cannot be fully understood outside the broader context of colonial oppression and

the liberation struggle. In fact, Zeilig (2008) states that student politics at the University of Rhodesia in the 1970s was directed by national politics. For instance, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) prescribed the course of action for the students' movement. The students' engagements were both ideological and practical, reflecting the shared grievances, goals, and adversaries of students and nationalist movements. To comprehensively analyse the role of students during this period, it is essential to categorize their activities into on-campus and off-campus efforts. On-campus activism included strikes, stay-ins, sabotages, and other forms of organized resistance that disrupted the colonial administration, while off-campus activities involved direct collaboration with nationalist movements and warring parties through intelligence gathering, mobilization, and ideological dissemination. This dual approach demonstrates the depth of the relationship between student politics and African nationalism, showing that university students' activities were on the one hand shaped by African nationalism and on the other hand African liberation ideology was also influenced by students' political actions. This further echoes Hove (2024) argument that students' activism was not merely reactionary but was deeply rooted in the broader discourse of African nationalism, reinforcing the idea that student politics was an essential component of the resistance against colonial rule. However, as cautioned by West (1992) and Kriger (1992), African society in Rhodesia was not homogenous. Thus, social and economic stratification influenced the extent of individuals' participation in activism. As such, some students, due to their backgrounds and aspirations, opted out of political engagement, explaining why political activism was concentrated among a distinct group of individuals whose names became prominent in the historical record.

#### *Students On-Campus Activities during the War*

Demonstrations constituted a fundamental strategy through which University of Rhodesia students voiced their opposition to policies and decisions implemented by the colonial authorities. While some protests extended beyond the university premises, the majority were initiated on campus, where students, taking advantage of the campus physical environment and 'academic freedom,' could efficiently organize and mobilize. Hove and Dube (2022) emphasize that the university setting facilitates rapid mobilization, as students are in close proximity, enabling swift coordination of protests and marches. On the same note Maposa and Mlambo (2016) explain that the university gave students' academic freedom equated to democracy and the right to protest which rarely existed outside campus. Hodgkinson (2021) also adds that university campuses, both within and beyond Rhodesia, played a pivotal role in the history of Zimbabwe's liberation movements and the formation of the postcolonial state. This underscores the broader significance of campus activism, not only at the University of Rhodesia but also among exiled students who continued to engage in political resistance from abroad.

Student protests were already a common occurrence before the outbreak of the liberation war, particularly between 1962 and 1964. However, the protests usually took the form of peaceful demonstrations, boycotts, pamphleteering and picketing (Gaidzanwa 1993). For instance, in 1962, African students demonstrated against the visit of the Portuguese Consul of South-East Africa (Mozambique), whom they viewed as a representative of colonial repression (Hodgkinson, 2019). The following year, in April 1963, students protested against a visit by Lord Salisbury to the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (UCRN), later renamed the University of Rhodesia (Herald, 6/4/1963). In 1964, both black and white students staged a sit-in outside Parliament to protest the banning of *The African Daily News*, one of Rhodesia's widely circulated newspapers (Herald, 27/8/1964). While the issues that sparked these demonstrations directly affected students, they also held broader national significance. As Maposa and Mlambo (2016) argue, students leveraged their 'academic freedom' to engage with and address critical national concerns. This to a larger extent demonstrates the role of university students in national politics. The unity amongst black and white students in some protests such as the 1964 sit-in outside parliament also highlight a rare occurrence where racial differences were ignored in activism. Such scenarios challenge the dominant nationalist narratives that amplify racial divisions among University of Rhodesia students. Instead, it highlights moments of unity where students prioritized collective goals over racial differences, illustrating that

their activism was not solely dictated by racial politics but rather by a shared commitment to justice and social change.

The response of university students to the November 1965 Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) by the Ian Smith regime underscores their significant role in resisting colonial oppression. Black students reacted swiftly to the announcement, seeking ways to challenge and counteract what they viewed as a grave political injustice. They initially demanded that university officials publicly denounce UDI in unequivocal terms (Maposa & Mlambo, 2016). However, when their demands were ignored, a wave of protests erupted on campus, prompting intensified repression by the army, police, and the Central Intelligence Organisation (Shamuyarira, 1965). These student demonstrations ultimately led to the temporary closure of the university and the resignation of its principal, Walter Adams (Hodgkinson, 2019). Many student activists were subsequently imprisoned. For instance, Josiah Terry Maluleke, a Bachelor of Economics student at the University of Rhodesia, was sentenced to six years of severe punishment at Gonakudzingwa Prison (Maposa & Mlambo, 2016). Additionally, several university lecturers who expressed solidarity with African nationalism and opposed UDI including Terence and Shelagh Ranger, John Reed, Jaap and Ruth van Velsen, and John Conradie were also arrested (Chung, 2006). Reflecting on these events, student activist Michael Holman explained that their goal was to extend the principles of tolerance and justice, which existed within the university, to broader society (Hodgkinson, 2019). This highlights the critical role that university students played in the liberation struggle, using their academic platform to challenge the injustices of the colonial regime. The solidarity amongst lecturers also highlights that students' activities did not occur in isolation but were part of a broader intellectual resistance against colonial rule.

With the outbreak and intensification of the liberation war, student demonstrations became increasingly radicalized, with violent protests erupting at the University of Rhodesia. For instance, students demonstrated against the 1969 Referendum Bill which they regarded as obnoxious resulting in students such as Felix Muchemwa being victimised (Maposa and Mlambo 2016, Schoffeleers 2000). The most notable of these demonstrations was the 1973 *Chimukwembe* demonstration, which was the most violent student protest of the period (Mlambo, 1995). In 1977, African students, led by Students' Representative Council (SRC) President Ranga Zinyemba, staged a demonstration outside Parliament to oppose government plans to conscript African students into the Rhodesian army (White, 2004). While student protests had already been a feature of pre-war activism, they became more intense and confrontational during the war, reflecting the broader shift towards armed resistance by liberation movements. The radical shift was also a result of an increasing enrolment of black radical students at the university which brought more anticolonial ideas to the campus. According to Gaidzanwa (1993) the escalation of the war of national liberation also provided the impetus for more militant demands by Black students while polarizing the different racial communities on campus. Furthermore, these demonstrations were deeply connected to the wider anti-colonial struggle, as they consistently addressed colonial grievances. For example, the 1973 *Chimukwembe* demonstration was triggered by derogatory remarks made by Rhodesian Front (RF) parliamentarians against African university students, further highlighting the intersection between student activism and the nationalist struggle.

Students' political lives at the University of Rhodesia were however not always characterised by violent protests as insinuated in the existing historiography (see Mlambo 1995, Maposa and Mlambo 2016). Instead, in their day-to-day activities, students engaged in various non-political activities. Gaidzanwa (1993) explains that many students (both male and female) wanted to live on campus because they desired greater freedom from parental control, to be sexually active, to consume alcohol frequently, and to behave in a manner that would not be tolerated in their homes. Of significance, however, is that it was through these mundane activities that on-campus political mobilisation took shape. As such it was relatively easy for students to mobilise each other and engage in other nonviolent activities. For instance, stay inns, symbolic resistance, sabotages, acts of espionage and intelligence gathering continued to be common activities by students at the university of Rhodesia campus in the



1970s (Hodgkinson 2019). In acts of political mobilisation, student activists at the University of Rhodesia in the late 1960s and 1970s promoted the spread of Leninist ideology that encouraged an overthrow of the colonial regime. The situation was worsened by that the student body leadership of the mid to late 1970s had become predominantly black and anticolonial.

The intersection of students' social lives and political activism also highlights the gender dynamics within student politics at the University of Rhodesia. Gaidzanwa (1993) notes that by the 1970s, more black women had become active participants in student activism, although they often held subordinate roles such as secretaries and pamphlet writers in clubs and student associations. This participation of women marked a notable shift in gender representation, as student politics, across racial lines, at the University of Rhodesia had traditionally been male-dominated (Chung, 2006). The increased involvement of female students in activism, despite the constraints imposed by the 1967 Law and Order Maintenance Act (LOMA) which prohibited students from publishing or distributing politically sensitive materials on campus demonstrates the vital contributions of less prominent student figures. Their participation, though often overlooked, was integral to the broader student movement that played a crucial role in resisting colonial rule. This also underscores the sacrifices made by students in different capacities, all working towards the common goal of political change.

#### *Students Off-Campus Activities during the War*

University students played a crucial role in raising political awareness within African communities and among younger students in primary and secondary schools. This was largely possible because most black university students came from marginalized and oppressed African backgrounds. Chung (2006) and Gaidzanwa (1993) concur that black students at the University of Rhodesia were representatives of the broader African population, which faced systemic exploitation and discrimination under white settler colonial rule. Maposa and Mlambo (2016) further emphasize that university lecturers and students occupied a distinct position in society due to their academic training, which equipped them with the ability to critically analyse and articulate national issues. As a result, they emerged as powerful voices advocating for the oppressed, gaining significant influence in national political discourse. Their activism led to them being labelled as radical Marxists, accused of inciting resistance against the colonial regime. By the mid-1970s, this perception had intensified, resulting in the imprisonment and expulsion of nearly half of the university's lecturers (Gelfand, 1978).

The university students' influence on African communities and school children was facilitated by their status as role models and their periodic engagement in temporary teaching positions during academic vacations. Through these teaching roles, university students established direct and influential contact with school students. On the same note, the school students often looked up to the university students for inspiration and guidance. Chung (2006) highlights that it was common for university students to take up temporary teaching positions in secondary schools, where they engaged in clandestine political mobilization during the liberation struggle. Similarly, Mhanda (2011) references Arthur Chadzingwa, a University of Rhodesia student in 1969, who leveraged his involvement in student politics to gain access to nationalist underground networks. Within these networks, he facilitated the recruitment and political conscientization of rural school students, encouraging their participation in nationalist efforts. Likewise, Hove (2024) documents the activities of Reuben Mqwayi, a university student activist in 1971, who utilized his position as a temporary teacher at Dadaya and Empandeni missions to mobilize secondary school students against colonial rule. These examples underscore the critical role university students played in extending political mobilization beyond campus, actively contributing to the nationalist movement even when they were not physically present at the university. Through direct engagement with younger students, they reinforced the ideological foundations of the liberation struggle and expanded the base of resistance against colonial rule.

In the late 1970s when the war intensified and became more confrontational, university students joined other youths as collaborators and guerrillas in the war effort. Many duties that included intelligence and information gathering, spying and in some cases, some went for guerrilla military

training. Gaidzanwa (1993) explains that in the mid to late 1970s when the war escalated many black students left the university and joined guerrilla armies that were fighting against the colonial regime. According to Zeilig (2008) university students were more impactful in exile. Zeilig (2008) argue that even though university students did lead important struggles at the university, it was their exile and role in directing the liberation war that was more impactful. This is also supported by Hodgkinson (2021) who explains that students in exile were very much motivated to join guerrilla armies. This argument reinforces the effective role of students in off campus political activities. However, as early as the 1970s some including Cefking (1975) had already noted the failure by University of Rhodesia students to develop a clear political strategy that linked the rural struggle to an urban political mobilization, in the townships, factories and at the university.

## 5. Conclusion

In a nutshell, this article details the intersection of student politics and liberation ideology during the war of liberation in Rhodesia (1966–1979). The study highlights the critical role played by university students in the broader nationalist struggle against colonial rule. The argument put forward is that student activism at the University of Rhodesia was not only an extension of pre-existing resistance traditions but also a significant force that shaped the liberation movement. Through demonstrations, strikes, sabotage, clandestine mobilization, and intellectual contributions, university students positioned themselves as both ideological and practical agents of change. Their activism was deeply intertwined with the broader nationalist struggle, as they collaborated with political movements, trade unions, and underground networks to advance the goals of decolonization. While some students faced scepticism from nationalist military factions, their status as intellectuals and future leaders earned them respect within nationalist circles. The role of students extended beyond campus, as they influenced primary and secondary school students, participated in underground political mobilization, and engaged in transnational activism, particularly among those forced into exile. The increasing radicalization of student activism over time mirrored the escalating intensity of the liberation war, reflecting a dynamic relationship between student resistance and nationalist armed struggle. Ultimately, this study underscores the significance of student politics and their mundane activities as essential arms of African nationalism. The University of Rhodesia became a crucial site of resistance, where students not only contested colonial policies but also contributed to the ideological and organizational foundations of Zimbabwe's liberation. Their activism not only influenced the outcome of the nationalist struggle but also shaped post-independence political structures and leadership. By highlighting the contributions of student activists, this study contributes to a broader understanding of the multiple fronts of resistance that characterized Zimbabwe's liberation war and the enduring legacy of student activism in shaping national identity and governance.

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