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The tribal catastrophe that awaits Zimbabwe  
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The worst may not be over in Zimbabwe. If every white farmer were hacked to death and his farm consigned to ruin, the worst might not be over. The worst is what faces not a few thousand whites but a few million blacks: the Matabele people.

My evidence is anecdotal, sketchy and based on unsourced information, but a boyhood spent there lends me confidence to back my hunch. My fears are sharpened by those in Zimbabwe to whom I have been speaking this week.

The majority Mashona tribe who occupy the richer, northern part of the country centred on Harare, may soon be urged by their leader, Robert Mugabe, and his Zanu (Patriotic Front) governing party into a genocidal bid to take from the southern Matabele ("take back", he would say) the lands which the Mashona believe were stolen from them more than a hundred years ago. The situation has parallels with Kosovo. The plan would be to drive the Matabele, by terror and by massacre, over the southern borders of Zimbabwe whence (in some Mashona minds) they came.

A little history is useful here. Much is disputed and what follows is the white settlers' version, and reality may have been cloudier: but this story of black-on-black aggression suits the modern, militant Mashona viewpoint among whom it has taken hold. It gives their tribal nationalism a narrative.

In the 19th century much of what is now Zimbabwe was inhabited by the Mashona people and smaller associated tribes. There was no central command structure, just a shared cluster of dialects around a recognisable language. They were pastoral people: subsistence agriculturalists.

To their south, in what is now South Africa, the Zulu people had coalesced into something like the Romans of southern Africa. So ferocious was Zulu imperial policy — the choice was between subordination and extermination — that splinter groupings fled in revolt from the hub. Thus were the Swazi people established in what is now Swaziland. And thus, under Chief Mzilikazi and others, around the middle of the 19th century, were the Ndebele (or Matabele) people established in and around what is now the south of Zimbabwe, centred upon Bulawayo, dispossessing the Mashona. All spoke, and speak, a Zulu-like language.

By massacre and pillage the Matabele pushed the less warlike Mashona north. But at the end of the 19th century, Rhodes, Empire and the British South Africa Police froze the tribal map along lines close to the present division between Mashonaland and Matabeleland.

Each of the two peoples in succession later rose in rebellion against the whites. The Matabele rebellion was brave, focused and short: a military campaign ending in total military defeat. Valiant Chief Lobengula (who had visited Queen Victoria with a tribal delegation to beg for his people's rights) was killed. The Mashona rebellion was more insidious, slow-burning, sporadic and difficult to quell, but it was quelled. Mashona ideologues call this uprising against the white settlers "the first *Chimurenga*". They call the uprising of combined Mashona and Matabele freedom-fighters against Ian Smith's Government during the 1960s and 1970s "the second *Chimurenga*", which they believe will not be complete until white farmers are removed from their land and it is given back to the Mashona and their friends.

Thus, tribal historians may think, comes the end of tribal history.

They may be wrong. A document I have seen gives chilling voice to what I know goes already with the grain of a Mashona version of the past.

The document speaks of “the third *Chimurenga*”. What this would be is all too clear: a Mashona crusade spearheaded by Zanu (PF) to drive the southern Matabele, of whom there are millions, off their land. The massacre (by North Korean-trained Zimbabwean Government forces) of at least 3,000 and up to 7,000 Matabele in the 1980s, well-documented yet somehow never properly noticed, could be a terrible augury.

The full document (see link on right) has been doing the rounds only recently among concerned people in Zimbabwe, but appears to date from the earlier years of Mugabe’s presidency. Its authorship is unknown and I cannot certify its authenticity — that it might be a Matabele scare story remains a possibility — but to me it has every appearance of having been written by a literate, well-educated tribal zealot of a racist-fascistic turn of mind, with a vituperative if stilted command of English, Marxist jargon and a biblical style. I would guess the author is a mission-educated Mashona man: a “blue-skies” thinker and propagandist in Zanu (PF), not an active politician. The document seems intended for an inner-core and calls itself a “progress review on the 1979 Grand Plan”.

Mugabe is extolled as a Mashona Jesus, a “precious present” from history and “perfect embodiment of all our cultural norms and values” who has “an incredible consciousness of who we are as a people”. After a few pages of this and some routine attacks on Western imperialists, Tony Blair et al, the paper moves to its thrust: “For many years both the Ndebeles and Europeans were living under a shameful illusion that the crimes of their forefathers had been forgiven and forgotten ... Is it possible that such heinous crimes as those committed by these people against the Shona can just be swept under the carpet because it is politically expedient to do so?”

“Now, comrades, come to think of it — a settler is a settler — *period!* What peaceful coexistence can there be to talk about between the majority indigenous Shona and the occupying force of those of Ndebele extraction? A black settler is as unwelcome as a white settler in our country.”

Then comes the most chilling section. *Land*: “...a bone of contention since the Ndebele occupation of Zimbabwe. The deployment of Shonas in Rural Matabeleland will be the last blow to break the spine of the enemy. Land that is still in white hands must all find its way into Shona hands.”

This first is now happening. What must happen next, suggests this document, is horribly clear.

On leaving the Rhodesia Department of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 1976 I wrote a memo to my head of department saying that in the years ahead, as Rhodesia moved towards and then beyond independence, the key to the most intractable difficulties would be land. I despaired.

Of finding a permanent solution I still despair but a more urgent task may face us. We may have to forestall an immediate massacre. Make no mistake, as Zimbabwe’s economy stumbles and famine grows, a fight with the Matabele would enhance Mugabe’s troubled position among his own people.

What can Britain do? Here, unlike Iraq, our historical connection is plain. Here, unlike Iraq, the problem is manageable, the cost affordable, and there is less danger of interference destabilising the region. It would be the flight of Matabele refugees into Botswana which would destabilise the region and the Botswana Government would share our anxiety.

The South Africans are less reliable allies: Thabo Mbeki’s position is ambiguous and the ANC feels no strong bond with the Zulu-speaking peoples.

The looming crisis in Zimbabwe tests to the limit my belief that Britain should avoid military adventures, but with our European and American allies we should consider every measure short of invasion or assassination to remove Mugabe.

As the crisis there deepens it will be desperately important for its victims and potential victims in Zimbabwe, black and white, to avoid a trap of which I think some of the more naive among them are not properly aware. I would advise them to steer clear of the reactionary Right in Britain. Steer clear of covert white supremacists who have a

drum of their own to bang. Steer clear of those who care only about whites and those whose only real concern is with the property interests of British kith and kin.

Remember that the Tories were in power when Mugabe's men massacred thousands of southern Matabele, and a Tory Government showed little interest in those blacks' plight. Call to mind the young Baroness Amos, who is black, at the Lords dispatch box when elderly peers whose white friends and relatives have interests in Central Africa intercede on behalf of white settlers.

I cannot read the mind of Lady Amos but I know what I would feel in her shoes. It is to a Labour Government that any useful appeal must be made, and it must be made for the lives and property of all Mugabe's victims and potential victims, the overwhelming majority of whom are Africans.

Something terrible is afoot in Zimbabwe. Rwanda was a Belgian colony but Zimbabwe was ours. Britain should be preparing for a looming humanitarian catastrophe there. There may be no better warning than what we know already. It is enough.