

“The Matebeleland Massacres/Gukurahundi were a Moment of Madness”: Forgetful Memory and Contestations over Historical Truth and Justice in Zimbabwe’s 1st Post-Colonial Genocide

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This paper explores the contrasting memories and narratives between the state and victims as well as human rights groups over the Matebeleland/*Gukurahundi* massacres in Zimbabwe. Between January 1983 and mid-1986, Robert Mugabe deployed his notorious North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade unit into Zimbabwe’s Matebeleland region purportedly to quell the Ndebele dissident problem. This heralded the beginning of what many analysts have called the first post-colonial Zimbabwean holocaust, genocide or the infamous *Gukurahundi* (*implying the first rainstorm that washes away the chaff or rubbish*) against the Ndebele ethnic minority. This was done with Mugabe’s blessings as the world stood by, paying lip service while his undisciplined military brigade systematically killed, raped and tortured about 20000 people. Mugabe has never officially apologized for the *Gukurahundi* which he has simply described as “a moment of madness”. This paper therefore observes that attempts at documenting narratives of such atrocities from a state perspective and seeking the truth have always met with complications and contestations ranging from total media blackout, forgetful memory, selective misinformation denial and lies. It contends that by denouncing the atrocities as a moment of madness, Mugabe adopted forgetful memory tendencies where he chose to deliberately forget or remember particular events so as to absolve him and the state from blame on the pretext that the *Gukurahundi* was committed by a madman or a mad-state that was not in its right frame of mind. Despite this clampdown on facts and truth, competing narratives about the horrors from the affected areas managed to emerge from victims, relief agencies, churches, journalists and human rights activists, especially the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace. In the long run, these conflicting narratives have made the quest for the truth and for transitional justice for the victims difficult as Mugabe has been reluctant to accept responsibility for the atrocities. In fact he has downplayed the gravity of the massacres and blamed ZAPU for supporting the dissidents as well as human rights groups for exaggerating the horrors. Likewise, the findings of a state-crafted pseudo-commission of enquiry that he established in the aftermath of the civil conflict, known as the Chihambakwe Commission of Enquiry, have never been publicized. The paper shall ethnographically engage life histories of the victims and perpetrators of the *Gukurahundi* and archives from the state and human rights activists in investigating these contrasting memories and narratives about one of the dark moments in post-colonial Zimbabwean history.