

Mugabe Still Fears Chitepo's Legacy

Author: [IWPR Srdan](#)

President remains anxious to counter claims that he benefitted from the death of Zimbabwe's Nelson Mandela.

Thirty years ago on the morning of March 18, Herbert Chitepo - leader of the Rhodesian liberation movement ZANU - was assassinated when a bomb planted in his Volkswagen Beetle exploded outside his home in Lusaka, the capital of Zambia.

The murder of Chitepo - whose remains were found inside the car, which was blown onto the roof of his house by the force of the blast - happened during one of the darkest periods of Zimbabwean liberation politics, when a comparatively unknown ZANU militant, Robert Mugabe, was trying to topple the incumbent 51-year-old leader.

Following Chitepo's death, there was extensive bloodletting between ZANU's ethnic and ideological factions. Mugabe emerged as Chitepo's successor, and he went on to become prime minister and then president of independent Zimbabwe - posts that Chitepo would perhaps have filled had he lived.

The question of who killed Chitepo has never faded away in Zimbabwe, and is whispered incessantly in the beer halls and village courtyards.

There has been no closure on the death of Zimbabwe's lost leader, and while it is dangerous to ask about it, even today's schoolchildren take the risk, as Dr Terence Ranger, an expert on Rhodesia/Zimbabwe and a retired professor of race relations at Oxford University, told IWPR.

"Last time I spoke to secondary schoolchildren in Zimbabwe, the headmaster rather foolishly said that I could answer any questions about history," he said. "A dozen hands shot up. They all wanted to know who killed Chitepo."

The ordinary public, historians and opposition politicians would also like to know who was responsible for the murder of Chitepo, Rhodesia's first black barrister who served for a while as the first African Director of Public Prosecutions in British-ruled Tanganyika.

Some claim that they know the answer.

David Martin, an Africa correspondent for the UK's Observer, claimed in his book "The Chitepo Assassination" that the murder was arranged by Rhodesian prime minister Ian Smith, Zambian president Kenneth Kaunda and South African president John Vorster. They are said to have seen Chitepo and his militancy as an obstacle to their Machiavellian ruses and he therefore had to be removed.

Martin said a Scotsman was recruited by agents of Ian Smith in Salisbury, now Harare, to carry bomb parts into Zambia and blow Chitepo away. Martin said he had written the book to "rest the spirits that have remained disturbed for a decade".

But Martin's claim is dismissed by many others, including Chitepo's widow, Victoria.

In July 2001, and after 16 years of silence, Victoria claimed that her husband's murder was an internal ZANU job, and demanded unsuccessfully that his killers be brought to justice. Her plea followed statements by Kaunda that Chitepo's ZANU opponents, not Rhodesian agents, were responsible for the killing.

Veteran nationalist James Chikerema, who with Chitepo was one of the founding members of ZAPU liberation movement before ZANU split away, has another theory about his death.

"I knew Chitepo for years. He was murdered by [Josiah] Tongogara and the Karanga mafia," he said.

Tongogara was the commander of ZANU's guerrilla forces in exile at a time of dangerously high ethnic tensions within the movement, between Chitepo's Manyika clan of the larger tribal Shona grouping, and Tongogara's Karanga clan.

"I saw Tongogara soon after Chitepo had been killed," said Chikerema. "We were at State House [in Lusaka] on that morning of March 18. I said to him, 'You are a murderer. You will never get away with this.' Then I reached for my gun but the Zambian police got hold of me and stopped me. There would have been a shoot out there and then."

Asked how Tongogara reacted to this, Chikerema said, "He was frightened. He looked sheepish and guilty."

However, until the day he died in a mysterious car crash on Boxing Day 1979, Tongogara - long seen as a charismatic alternative to Mugabe as leader of Zimbabwe - always denied involvement in the murder.

No autopsy results or photographs of Tongogara's body were ever released, leading to further speculation. A CIA briefing two days later described Tongogara as a potential political rival to Mugabe because of his "ambition, popularity and decisive style". On the same day, the US embassy in Zambia issued a statement saying, "Almost no one in Lusaka accepts Mugabe's assurance that Tongogara died accidentally. When [our] ambassador told the Soviet ambassador the news, the [latter] immediately charged 'inside job'."

The stories and the theories about the assassination of Chitepo, regarded by many ZANU fighters as their Nelson Mandela, whirl around to this day and have the complexity of an Agatha Christie mystery.

While there are some who believe Mugabe himself had Chitepo killed, Chikerema doubts this. Nevertheless, the murder shaped contemporary Zimbabwe and allowed Mugabe to move from being a background player to leader. It is he, who by force of personality, has shaped Zimbabwe over the past 25 years and no one will ever know how the nation might have fared under President Herbert Chitepo.

Mugabe, anxious to eradicate all accusations that he benefitted from the death of Chitepo, has introduced a widely criticised "patriotic history" in all Zimbabwe's schools, colleges and universities designed to prove that there was total ZANU unity under Mugabe's inspired leadership during the 1972-79 struggle for freedom. Loyal "historians" have been hired to write a torrent of books and articles proving that divisions among black nationalists were always created by outsiders.

But Mugabe still fears Chitepo's enduring legacy, just as he fears that of Tongogara. Indeed, Mark Chavunduka, editor of the independent Standard, was arrested and tortured in 2001 for writing that Mugabe was haunted by Tongogara's ghost.

Throughout Mashonaland there is a legend that when Chitepo's remains were brought from Lusaka and reburied at Heroes Acre, on the outskirts of Harare, a white bird flew at the face of Mugabe, who ducked and cried out in fear. And throughout Chitepo's home province, Manicaland, in the Eastern Highlands, the people dismiss the official version that Smith's white agents murdered their most famous son.

In the villages of Manicaland, songs are still being sung calling on Chitepo to rise from the grave and lead Zimbabwe.

The remains of the dead Chitepo and Tongogara today lie close to each other in Heroes Acre, the full stories of their mysterious deaths untold. And, ironically, Mugabe may join them there one day.

Author and broadcaster Trevor Grundy worked in Lusaka in 1975 for the Financial Times and the BBC and was the first reporter at the scene of the assassination of Herbert Chitepo on March 18, 1975.

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