

Book Review

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Blessing-Miles, Tendi (2020), *The Army and Politics in Zimbabwe: Mujuru, the Liberation Fighter and Kingmaker*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, ISBN 978-1-108-47289-0 (paperback), 348 pages

Solomon Mujuru – or Rex Nhongo to use his *nom-de-guerre* – has been a key figure in Zimbabwe’s liberation struggle and in politics after independence. Given his importance and prominence, one wonders that the first biography comes out only now. Blessing-Miles Tendi deserves appreciation for offering us an account of Mujuru’s life that is well-researched, very detailed and even exciting to read. It skillfully uses a biography to shed light on crucial sequences in Zimbabwean history.

Tendi portrays Mujuru as liberation fighter and kingmaker – as well as a betrayed national hero. The book moves chronologically in ten thematic chapters that link important moments in Mujuru’s life with key moments in Zimbabwe’s history. Chapter 2 starts with Mujuru’s early years being marked by poverty, limited education, the early death of his mother and regular moves, which are “pointers to the future” in which we see Mujuru as an “action-oriented person”, concerned with “unremitting acquisitive pursuit of wealth” and striving for personal independency (pp. 23–24). The book elaborates how Mujuru joined the liberation movement, namely the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU), and later on defected to the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), where he was promoted and brought into central commanding positions in the liberation fight (chapter 3). He devoted his life to the struggle: “He led from the front and was at his most comfortable in the operational field. He lived for the warfront” (p. 9). Informing us about the secret that Robert Mugabe was Mujuru’s nephew – or rather “a distant relative” (p. 84) – Tendi explains the key role Mujuru had played in elevating Mugabe into the leadership position of ZANU during the liberation struggle and how they and their comrades then brought independence and dealt with the transition period (chapters 4–6). Mujuru was appointed as chief of the army after independence and in this position oversaw the integration of the liberation fighters into the army (chapter 7). The book then delves into post-independence politics and inter alia provides details on the operation in Matabeleland, which some call ethnic genocide or ethnic cleansing (chapter 8). We learn that “in terms of chain command, Nhongo bears ultimate responsibility,” but was in effect not in control of the north-Korean trained “Fifth Brigade,” which was running the operation. Rather, that infamous Brigade reported directly to Mugabe and Emmerson Mnangagwa. While Tendi uses several pages to present the details related to this, we at



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least learn from one paragraph that the other military “operations against dissidents, which Nhongo controlled directly, were exceptionally ruthless” (p. 204). Chapter 9 then turns to the issues of “love” and “fortune” and depicts Mujuru as an alcoholic, who loved “doing masculinity” (p. 232), and as a rather unsuccessful businessperson who was notwithstanding able to amass larger sums of money given his position in the state. We also learn that Mujuru continued pulling the strings in Zimbabwean politics, effectively working against Mugabe and Mnangagwa.

Finally chapter 10 provides the details of Mujuru’s death in 2011 and elucidates the mysterious circumstances, giving rise to the assumption that he was murdered for the benefit of President Mugabe.

Tendi’s book is a good read that provides another, more inside perspective on the liberation struggle and post-independence politics. It brushes away the assumption that nationalist movements were united and also shows that the power struggles in these movements continued after independence. In Zimbabwe, these struggles were fought particularly brutally. However, one cannot escape the feeling that the book could provide a more balanced assessment. It pictures Mujuru as a liberation hero and a serviceperson, who helped Mugabe come to power, who left his position as chief of the army to make space for others, and who was not involved in the many wrongdoings of the post-independence government but was genuinely interested in a transfer of power and stood against an extended rule of Mugabe. Tendi implies that Mujuru paid with his life for these positions. In fact, many in Zimbabwe and beyond question(ed) the circumstances of his death and challenged the official report on it. However, many in Zimbabwe and abroad also share the perspective – bluntly spelled out on Wikipedia – that Mujuru “was generally regarded as one of the most feared men in Zimbabwe.” That said, the biography is largely silent on that, rather seeing Mujuru as a victim of a power struggle in Zimbabwe. One could have also asked why Mujuru stayed in the Politburo and the Joint Operational Command – two key decision-making bodies in Zimbabwe – after his resignation as army chief. Why did he promote his wife into the vice-presidency? Why could he amass wealth? And why had he remained part of the power struggle within ZANU if he genuinely believed in change and could have stepped aside himself? A discussion of these questions would have led to a different, certainly more nuanced biography.

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