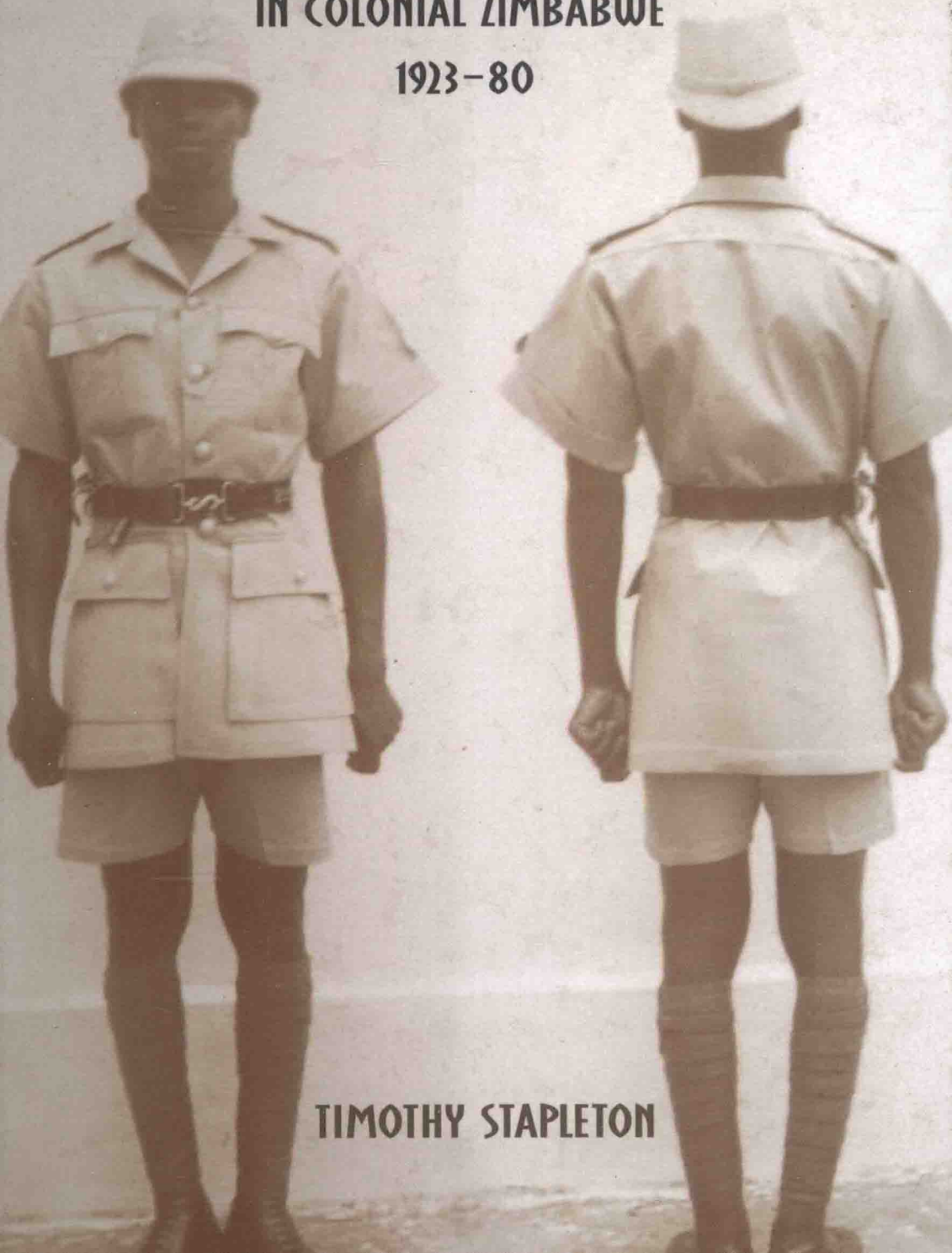


AFRICAN POLICE AND SOLDIERS

IN COLONIAL ZIMBABWE

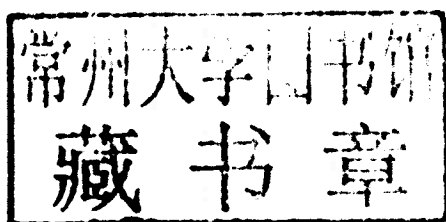
1923-80



TIMOTHY STAPLETON

African Police and Soldiers in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1923–80

Timothy Stapleton



 UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER PRESS

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Abbreviations

ANC	African National Congress (South Africa)
APTS	African Police Training School
BSANP	British South Africa Native Police
BSAP	British South Africa Police
CID	Criminal Investigation Division
CIO	Central Intelligence Organization
CO	Commanding Officer
CSM	Company Sergeant Major
CT	Communist Terrorist
FISB	Federal Intelligence and Security Bureau
FRELIMO	Front for the Liberation of Mozambique
ICU	Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union
KAR	King's African Rifles
NAD	Native Affairs Department
NAZ	National Archives of Zimbabwe
NCO	Non-commissioned Officer
NDP	National Democratic Party
NPA	Native Purchase Area
NPTS	Native Police Training School
NRR	Northern Rhodesia Regiment
PATU	Police Anti-Terrorist Unit
RAA	Rhodesian Army Association
RAAC	Rhodesian Air Askari Corps
RAR	Rhodesian African Rifles
RDR	Rhodesia Defence Regiment

RF	Rhodesian Front
RhAEC	Rhodesian Army Education Corps
RLI	Rhodesian Light Infantry
RNR	Rhodesia Native Regiment
RRR	Royal Rhodesia Regiment
RSM	Regimental Sergeant Major
SAS	Special Air Service
SRANC	Southern Rhodesia African National Congress
UDI	Unilateral Declaration of Independence
UFP	United Federal Party
ZANLA	Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army
ZANU	Zimbabwe African National Union
ZAPU	Zimbabwe African People's Union
ZIPRA	Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army
ZNA	Zimbabwe National Army
ZRP	Zimbabwe Republic Police

Place Names of Zimbabwe

Colonial (c. 1890–1980) – Post-independence (post-1980)

Bikita – Bikita

Bindura – Bindura

Bulawayo – Bulawayo

Chipinga – Chipinge

Chiredzi – Chiredzi

Enkeldoorn – Chivhu

Essexvale – Esigodini

Fort Victoria – Masvingo

Hartley – Chegutu

Inyanga – Nyanga

Gatooma – Kadoma

Gutu – Gutu

Gwanda – Gwanda

Gwelo – Gweru

Marandellas – Marondera

Matopos – Matobo

Melsetter – Chimanimani

Mount Darwin – Mount Darwin

Mrewa – Mrewa

Mtoko – Mtoko

Plumtree – Plumtree

Que Que – Kwekwe

Rusape – Rusape

Salisbury – Harare

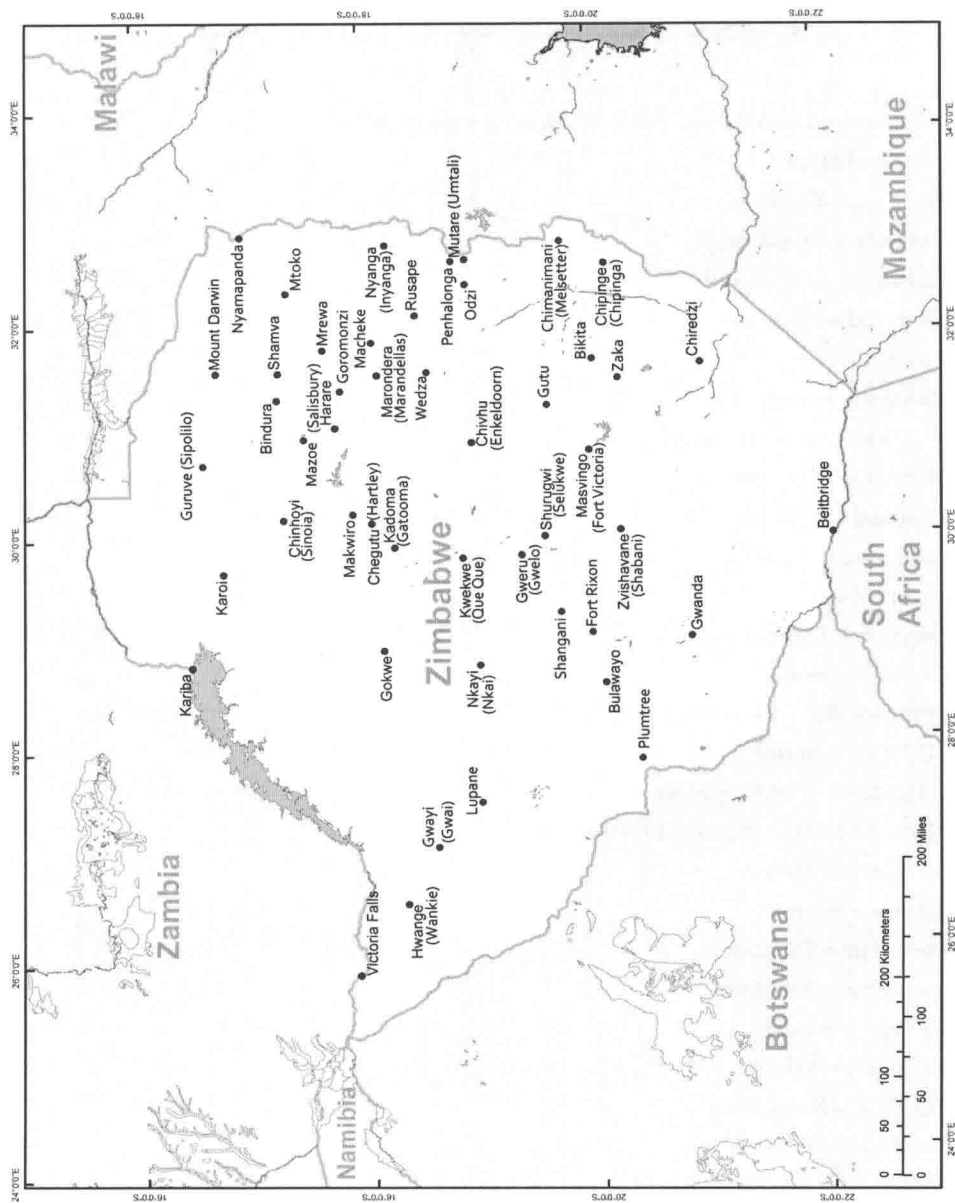
Selukwe – Shurugwi

Shabani – Zvishavane

Sinoia – Chinhoyi

Umtali – Mutare

Wankie – Hwange



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Introduction

It is well known that European colonial conquest and rule in Africa, generally from the 1890s to 1960s, could not have taken place without the active cooperation and participation of Africans as security force personnel. When most African countries were becoming independent in the 1960s, African nationalist historians portrayed the African response to colonial subjugation in terms of either heroic resistance or traitorous collaboration. Although more recent historians would usually reject this as over simplification, these views persist in broader African society, which makes the study of African colonial police or military service a potentially delicate topic. This is even more apparent in the case of Zimbabwe, where the African nationalist armed struggle against settler colonialism during the late 1960s and 1970s, a time when most other African countries were already independent, is very much within living memory and African nationalist views of history remain highly politicized. As such, the experience of African soldiers and police during the colonial period has received attention from historians of many countries in West and East Africa, but not from those of Zimbabwe.

The history of African colonial soldiers and police is interesting because of the many contradictions inherent in their lives. They originated from a subject and exploited African community, yet they provided the colonial state with its coercive power and enforced discriminatory laws. In the case of a settler society like colonial Zimbabwe, there were other ambiguities. The European settler minority usually explained their political ambitions for self-rule as something Britain owed them for participation in the world wars. That contribution, however, had been largely dependent upon African soldiers, who were told that they were fighting for freedom and democracy in far away campaigns but saw little of these at home. Given a lack of European manpower, African police, as members of a colonized indigenous majority, sometimes had to enforce law and order among the European colonizers. Looking at the paradoxes of African military and police service can reveal broader issues related to the nature of colonial society and illustrate why the system was not sustainable.

With the colonial occupation of the 1890s and early 1900s as background, this book concentrates on the lives and careers of black soldiers and police during the era of white settler rule in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). It focuses primarily on the period of formal settler political control from the granting of responsible government—a form of internal self-rule—by Britain in 1923 to the negotiated settlement of the liberation war that brought about

2 *Introduction*

the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980. The main reason for concentrating on this period is the availability of evidence. Before 1923 most African police and soldiers did not leave behind their own documentary records, as they were nonliterate, and, given the racial hierarchy of the time (which will be discussed below), they did not feature prominently in records authored by Europeans. This situation changed with the recruiting of literate African police from the 1930s and some literate African soldiers from the 1940s, who wrote many short accounts of their service which now constitute a wealth of evidence from the African perspective. In addition, as more African security force personnel were recruited and became increasingly important to the settler state, they featured more prominently in official documentation. This does not mean that it is impossible to study the colonial African police or military experience in what is now Zimbabwe between 1890 and 1923 but that, since there is less information, this period will be covered as background. This book is mostly not about the details of police procedure or military campaigns, though at times these will be important, but the life experience of African police and soldiers within the colonial society of Southern Rhodesia. Each chapter deals with a different theme and covers the entire temporal era. Relevant topics include what motivated Africans to enlist in colonial security forces, how they were perceived by others, their exposure to Western education, their changing daily life, including participation in organized sports and other leisure activities, their unique experience of war and intense violence, the involvement of African women in male-dominated security organizations, demands for improved conditions of service, and the experience of black former police and soldiers in civilian society.

Background

The Shona and Ndebele people, along with other smaller indigenous groups, were colonized by the British South Africa Company (BSAC) during the 1890s. After his agents exploited the illiteracy of the Ndebele ruler Lobengula to gain a written concession, mining magnate and politician Cecil Rhodes formed the BSAC, which held a charter to acquire and administer territory on behalf of Britain. Rhodes intended to outflank the independent and recently gold-rich Boer republic of the Transvaal by colonizing the area immediately to its north, where he also hoped to find great deposits of precious minerals. Consequently, in 1890 the BSAC organized a column of armed white settlers and prospectors from the Cape who occupied the area they called Mashonaland, which was predominantly inhabited by the Shona people and located to the east and northeast of the Ndebele Kingdom. Disappointed by a lack of gold, the BSAC exaggerated the extent of Ndebele raids against the Shona to justify its 1893 invasion and conquest of

Lobengula's territory, which they called Matabeleland. Under BSAC rule, Mashonaland in the east and Matabeleland in the west were combined as the colony of Southern Rhodesia, which developed an economy based on large, white-owned commercial farms and some mines. Deprived of much of their best land and taxed by the colonial state, Africans became a subject population with few options besides providing cheap labor for the capitalist economy. Once control of the territory passed from the BSAC to a white settler legislature in 1923, a series of racially discriminatory laws further limited black economic opportunities, such as small-scale commercial farming, and pushed more of them into low-paid wage labor and impoverished reserves.¹

During the colonial occupation of the early 1890s, the BSAC created two separate paramilitary police forces for each half of Southern Rhodesia. Consisting of armed Europeans, these were the Mashonaland Mounted Police and the Matabeleland Mounted Police. The first African police in Mashonaland were recruited in 1894 as part of the new Native Department, which would control and administer the indigenous people. European native commissioners were appointed to supervise local areas, and each was responsible for raising, arming, and equipping his own small African force. The European police, whose brutality had provoked African resistance, were instructed to stay out of African affairs. Native Department officials and police proved more effective at tax collection, which was central to the colonial project because it compelled Africans to acquire money by entering the capitalist economy as wage-labor or peasant producers. The colonial employment of African police in Matabeleland was organized as part of the military occupation of that territory following the 1893 defeat of the Ndebele Kingdom. By 1895 the white-led Matabeleland Native Police consisted mostly of Ndebele warriors who had been part of several of the late Lobengula's age regiments. Trained in Western-style military drill and musketry, they were posted to native commissioners' stations to help collect labor, arrest deserters, seize and brand cattle, assemble evidence in criminal cases involving Africans, and generally gather information. Historian T. O. Ranger states that "there is overwhelming evidence of the hatred with which they were regarded by the Ndebele generally."² Journalist Lawrence Vambe described the impact of African police in the 1890s as a "reign of terror" and wrote that "they came into the African villages for all sorts of reasons and were a law unto themselves, just as was the European. They used the sjambok [whip] freely. They were arrogant and insulted everybody without cause."³

The Ndebele and Shona rebellions of 1896-97 were caused by colonial cruelty, sudden taxation, and the opportunity presented by the absence of many European police who had been captured in the failed 1895 attempt to overthrow the Boer government of the neighboring Transvaal. While some abusive African constables were among the first to be killed by Ndebele rebels, about half the African police in Matabeleland defected and put their firearms

and training to use against colonial forces. This made the BSAC administration hesitant to continue employing local African police and, in 1897, once the rebellion was crushed, constables were recruited from other territories, such as Northern Rhodesia, Zululand, and Zanzibar. It was fairly common for colonial police forces in Africa to enlist African men from outside the community they policed, as it was believed that lack of kinship and cultural ties would make them more willing to enforce colonial laws and payment of tax. The first public parade of the new "Native Contingent" was held in November 1897 when Inspector R. C. Nesbitt was presented with the Victoria Cross, Britain's highest military decoration, for his actions during the rebellion. In 1902 the BSAC employed 300 African police, all of whom were stationed in Mashonaland, and the only African constables on duty in Matabeleland, which was where most of the problems with African police had occurred, were in the Bulawayo town police. When the two separate colonial mounted police forces were amalgamated into the British South Africa Police (BSAP) in 1903, Africans from both Mashonaland and Matabeleland were once again recruited, though men from neighboring territories continued to join for decades to come. As discussed below, the BSAP was like other colonial police forces in Africa, in which whites were in command and blacks followed orders. In 1904 an African police contingent was officially launched in Matabeleland for the first time since the rebellion, with most recruits having been Native Department messengers. The number of Africans in the BSAP steadily increased from 500 in 1903 to 600 in 1905. In 1904 the official establishment of Europeans was reduced from 750 to 550, and African police increased from 300 to 500. In 1908 a special training school for African constables—the Native Police Training School (NPTS)—was established in Salisbury at what would later be called Tomlinson Depot in order to standardize recruiting and instruction. In 1909 the Southern Rhodesian Constabulary, which constituted the urban police force in Salisbury, Bulawayo, Umtali, and Gwelo, and included Africans, was absorbed into the BSAP, which was then transferred from imperial to local control and placed under the command of a single police commissioner.⁴ This amalgamation marked the beginning of the gradual evolution of the BSAP from a paramilitary colonial occupation force into a professional law enforcement agency. In the 1960s, former BSAP commissioner A. S. Hickman explained this transition: "In the early days they were more soldiers than policemen, when I joined in 1924 their energies were about evenly divided, and now since the establishment of the regular army, they are more policemen than soldiers."⁵ Throughout the colonial era, European municipal administrations continued to employ their own African police as security guards. It was during the early colonial period that Europeans, and eventually Africans, began to refer to African police as the "Blackwatch," a double entendre related to both the famous Scottish regiment of that name and the skin color of Rhodesia's African watchmen.

Although colonial society in Southern Rhodesia was dominated by a white settler minority, from World War II onward, the vast majority of police were black. In the early twentieth century, Europeans not only commanded the BSAP but also played a prominent role in the day-to-day policing of Southern Rhodesia. The importance of African police, however, was gradually increasing. In 1924 Police Commissioner A. E. Capell wrote that "the Native Police are, without doubt, invaluable in the investigation and detection of crime, particularly in the case of crime by natives, of which, the majority of criminal cases consist."⁶ By World War I (1914–18), African police constituted slightly more than half of the force and their numbers continued to grow. BSAP annual reports show that in 1921 there were 494 Europeans and 806 Africans, in 1937 there were 547 Europeans and 1,067 Africans, and in 1945 there were 401 Europeans and 1,572 Africans. During World War II (1939–45), the number of European police declined because of military manpower demands, while, at the same time, more African police were needed to supervise a rapidly growing and urbanizing African population. At this time a small number of European women were recruited into the BSAP and the complement of African policemen was greatly enlarged. After the war Britain became the main source of European recruits for the BSAP, and since these men were completely unfamiliar with the country and its people, the force continued to rely heavily upon African police, who remained in the majority. In the 1950s, the era of African nationalist protest and decolonization, the BSAP was dramatically expanded. With respect to full-time members, in 1953 there were 1,049 Europeans and 2,323 Africans, and in 1960 there were 1,290 Europeans and 3,088 Africans. The impact of urbanization on the BSAP is illustrated by the fact that in Salisbury there were 61 European and 197 African police in 1945, and in ten years those figures increased to 216 and 498, respectively. By 1956, Salisbury's African township of Harare had a police station with 13 European and 60 African police, and the European suburb of Highlands had 7 European and 37 African police. After the African general strike of 1948, the all-European Police Reserve was greatly expanded. From this point, in terms of total BSAP membership, Europeans would outnumber Africans, but the latter would continue to dominate the regular force. The need to expand police manpower in the face of mounting African nationalist protest led to the creation of an African Police Reserve consisting of former BSAP regular members in the late 1950s, and, after the intense riots of 1960, membership in this force was extended to any volunteers who could pass a police security check. By the mid-1970s, at the height of Zimbabwe's War of Independence, there were approximately 2,000 white and 6,000 black full-time police. People of mixed racial origin, known in Southern Africa as "Coloureds," and Asians were kept out of the BSAP until the late 1970s.⁷

Mirroring colonial society, the BSAP operated as a racially segregated and hierarchical organization which retained the paramilitary ethos of the

conquest period. African police were seen as members of a force within a force. Up until World War II, black constables were considered part of the British South Africa Native Police (BSANP), whereas white police were members of the BSAP proper. As will be discussed in more detail, African and European police wore different uniforms, lived in different types of accommodations, and received different rates of pay. European police were considered part of a noble mounted police tradition who rode horses on rural patrols and during parades. African police were not part of this cavalry ethos, except for their duties in mucking out stalls and grooming horses, and either walked the beat or rode bicycles. European police were always superior, as the most junior European was considered senior to the most experienced African. For many young white police barely out of their teens, however, a veteran black sergeant major, though technically subordinate, represented an intimidating presence and a font of knowledge. Although BSAP members did not regularly carry firearms on duty, there were more restrictions placed on the handling of guns by African members, who generally could only carry rifles when patrolling remote areas that contained dangerous predators. When not involved in criminal cases, African police sometimes functioned as servants to European police, and during their basic training black policemen were indoctrinated into the tradition of looking after white policemen's horses. Before the introduction of motor transport during World War II, routine rural BSAP patrols would consist of one or two white police on horseback accompanied by a small group of black police who would walk behind them or lead pack horses and care for the animals when they made camp.⁸ When urban police cars were introduced to Salisbury in the late 1950s, it appears that only European police drove them, with an African constable riding along "ready to give immediate assistance at a given word."⁹

During the conduct of their law enforcement duties, African police served as assistants to European police, though procedures differed based on the race of the people they were dealing with. In situations involving Africans, black police would do the "leg work" of investigation while their white colleagues usually remained in the background and prepared legal documentation. When criminal cases primarily involved Europeans, white police would take the lead on investigations as well as prepare the appropriate files. Black police would help as needed by, for example, guarding crime scenes, translating for African witnesses, and providing logistical support. Dressed in civilian clothes, African detectives were used for covert surveillance of the broader African community, such as to give early warning of strike action in mine compounds or potentially subversive talk at political meetings. By tradition, African police could only arrest a European man if he posed an immediate and direct danger to another person and if there were no European police available to act. African policemen could not have

anything to do with European women. Although African policemen were limited in their capacity to interfere physically with Europeans, they were passively involved in enforcing law and order among them by serving as the “eyes and ears” of the authorities. For example, in 1954 an African constable in Fort Victoria (today’s Masvingo) observed three Europeans breaking into a store and then driving off in a stolen car. While the constable did not intervene, he informed his European sergeant and the suspects were eventually apprehended. On another occasion in 1965, Constable Dzingwiza pursued a European he suspected of having broken into a Salisbury shop until two passing European civilians overpowered him.¹⁰

On the military side, the BSAC employed armed African mercenaries from the Cape Colony, the “Cape Boys,” and local African allies during the colonial conquest of the 1890s. The shock of the 1896–97 rebellion and the mutiny of some African police meant that most of Southern Rhodesia’s white settlers would always deeply distrust armed blacks working for the colonial state. Indeed, in Southern Rhodesia it became illegal for Africans to possess firearms and there was a rigorous disarmament campaign. During the early 1900s, the BSAP maintained a Reserve Company of 150 Ngoni police recruited from neighboring territories, each armed with an obsolete single-shot Martini-Henry rifle and five rounds of ammunition, which “should always be ready for duty in quelling any minor breach of the peace or disturbance among local native inhabitants.”¹¹ When World War I broke out, colonial officials informed African communities that the conflict was to be a white man’s war in which blacks would not be involved. The small size of the European settler population and the continuation of the conflict, however, meant that if the colony was to maintain a military contribution to Britain’s war effort, understood by the settlers as central to their future political development, then Africans would have to be employed as soldiers. Consequently, in 1916 the Rhodesia Native Regiment (RNR) was formed from a nucleus of African police volunteers and a large number of recruits from the mining compounds. This infantry unit fought in the grueling bush war of the German East Africa campaign and returned to Southern Rhodesia in 1919, where it was very quickly demobilized. Largely on the strength of its wartime sacrifices, the colony gained responsible government from Britain in 1923 with a technically nonracial though qualified voting system which meant that white settlers held political power.¹²

The lasting legacy of the RNR was that a number of its veterans constituted the nucleus of the BSAP’s Askari Platoon, a paramilitary police unit that replaced the old Reserve Company. Based at NPTS in Salisbury, it conducted ceremonial drills, responded to emergencies, and trained police recruits, and its members were the only Africans in the colony at the time permitted to carry firearms on a regular basis. During the interwar period, the Askari Platoon, composed mostly of Africans from neighboring territories, many of