



Portugal's Guerrilla Wars in Africa: Lisbon's Three Wars in Angola, Mozambique and Portuguese Guinea 1961-74

Al J. Venter

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Portugal's three wars in Africa in Angola, Mozambique and Portuguese Guinea (Guine'-Bissau today) lasted almost 13 years - longer than the United States Army fought in Vietnam. Yet they are among the most underreported conflicts of the modern era. Commonly referred to as Lisbon's Overseas War (Guerra do Ultramar) or in the former colonies, the War of Liberation (Guerra de Libertacao), these struggles played a seminal role in ending white rule in Southern Africa. Though hardly on the scale of hostilities being fought in South East Asia, the casualty count by the time a military coup d'etat took place in Lisbon in April 1974 was significant. It was certainly enough to cause Portugal to call a halt to violence and pull all its troops back to the Metropolis. Ultimately, Lisbon was to move out of Africa altogether, when hundreds of thousands of Portuguese nationals returned to Europe, the majority having left everything they owned behind. Independence for all the former colonies, including the Atlantic islands, followed soon afterwards. Lisbon ruled its African territories for more than five centuries, not always undisputed by its black and mestizo subjects, but effectively enough to create a lasting Lusitanian tradition. That imprint is indelible and remains engraved in language, social mores and cultural traditions that sometimes have more in common with Europe than with Africa. Today, most of the newspapers in Luanda, Maputo - formerly Lourenco Marques - and Bissau are in Portuguese, as is the language taught in their schools and used by their respective representatives in international bodies to which they all subscribe. Indeed, on a recent visit to Central Mozambique in 2013, a youthful member of the American Peace Corps told this author that despite having been embroiled in conflict with the Portuguese for many years in the 1960s and 1970s, he found the local people with whom he came into contact inordinately fond of their erstwhile 'colonial overlords'. As a foreign correspondent, Al Venter covered all three wars over more than a decade, spending lengthy periods in the territories while going on operations with the Portuguese army, marines and air force. In the process, he wrote several books on these conflicts, including a report on the conflict in Portuguese Guinea for the Munger Africana Library of the California Institute of Technology. Portugal's Guerrilla Wars in Africa represents an amalgam of these efforts. At the same time, this book is not an official history, but rather a journalist's perspective of military events as viewed by somebody who has made a career of reporting on overseas wars, Africa's especially. Venter's camera was always at hand; most of the images used between these covers are his. His approach is both intrusive and personal and he would like to believe that he has managed to record for posterity a tiny but vital segment of African history.

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From Reader Review Portugal's Guerrilla Wars in Africa: Lisbon's Three Wars in Angola, Mozambique and Portuguese Guinea 1961-74 for online ebook

Kevin Tole says

The colonial wars in the three African Portuguese colonies of Angola, Mozambique and Guinea not only went on for a long long time but were succeeded by civil wars that were just as brutal and as long. In Angola the Portuguese faced insurgents from Zambia, the Congo and Angola from 1961 to 1974; in Mozambique the insurgents came from mostly from Tanzania and headed south from 1964 to 1974 and in Portuguese Guinea in West Africa the 'freedom fighters' came from neighbouring Guinea and Senegal between 1963 and 1974. The armed forces and resources that a small country like Portugal put out to attempt to contain and countermand these liberation movements / guerrilla activity drained the European home base and affected the armed forces and colonists in Africa as well as those back on the Iberian peninsula so much that what happened was the armed forces took over in Portugal in 1974 staging what is now known as the Carnation Revolution.

All three wars of liberation – and I will call them that because that's what the insurgents wanted was liberation from Portuguese colonial rule and the right to self-rule / independence - were complex affairs which demanded different solutions. There were common elements but the differences were greater than the similarities. Just about all three conflicts were for the most part ignored in the west which seemed to be concentrating on America and Vietnam. All three were classic guerrilla insurgent wars

It seems odd therefore to try and write a book about the three wars including all three in one large and weighty volume and not taking one of them alone from start to finish. This is what Al Venter has done with this book. I wanted to read something about the end of Portuguese colonisation having worked in both Angola and Mozambique. The material in English is thin on the ground and Venter's books are the most accessible. He is South African and a former employee of the South African Navy and Jane's Defense Review.

What you get is a deeply (for me) frustrating book. Episodic in nature with no real focus on beginnings, reasons, whys, wherefores except as by-products to go with the general gung-ho of a journalist with access to most areas by the fact that he was one of the few there. Venter might be a journalist but he's not a writer – he's not Robert Fisk or John Pilger – its more kind of Studs Terkel. I really don't give a s*** about naming all the armaments (correctly). You pretty much know where its coming from before you start. There is no analysis from the other side and no attempt to understand the concept of wanting your country back from the colonial powers. The opposition are 'Terrorists', 'guerrilla insurgents', Marxist indoctrinated invaders supported by the new Comintern in insurgencies of Cold War-by-proxy. Kenneth Kaunda and Julius Nyerere were the supporters of international terrorism dedicated to throwing over the order of things-as-they-should-be. Leastways thats how he comes across and that appears to be his stance for much of the time.

And just as easily, he suddenly drops into a line of insight which really IS illuminating. His views of the Portuguese conscript armies and the native forces within Angola, Moz and Guinea is really excellent. He is best when he is reporting the words of others who are generally more insightful and often even more right wing and conservative. Saying that though, a number of the Portuguese officers he talks to went on to be leaders in the Carnation Revolution and were generally left of centre and in some cases far left to anarchist).

I must admit the book troubled me. Parts of it had me despairing at the strongly pro-Portuguese support-the-colonialist, pro staus-quo nature of it. Other parts of it had me gripped. That, I suppose, all has to do with where I am coming from in reading the book. That is, the experience of the book is a relativistic one – in that

it all depends on where you're starting from. Its the old Freedom Fighter / Terrorist dichotomy.

I suppose what I should do now is, like one of the Portugese commanders says, go out and read and re-read my Mao and Guevara and Giap and get my political theory shit together. Maybe Al should try it too. One thing's for sure – after this you really need to find out more about the fall of the Salazar and Caetano and the reasons for and development of the Carnation Revolution - well much of it has to do with the African wars - but it's trying to realise what the climate was in Portugal that would add meaning to the African end too. After that, then I suppose you could try and start to understand the Angolan civil war from 1975 – 2002, the Mozambique civil war from 1977 – 1994 and the various periods of unrest in Guinea-Bissau.

Give the book a try but realise it's not Vietnam: The Ten Thousand Day War, probably the best written and researched book I have read on modern wartime conflict, and it's not the whole story – indeed there were times when I wondered if Venter wasn't in fact some kind of spook for the South African Defense forces – come to think of it, he probably was. But what the hell, you have to read it all and try and see both sides even though one may be either obscured by clouds or even sitting on the dark side of the moon whilst the other basks in glorious technicolor. And he has written an excellent book on South Africa in the period of apartheid which comes with great recommendations.

Keep the aspidistra flying, Colonel Blimp. But lets see what else is out there on anti-colonial war.

Mark Grim says

Very insightful, though rather one sided as the only people the author interviewed are Portuguese soldiers and officers, with the exception of Amilcar Cabral, who only gets a few paragraphs. Surely it wouldn't have been that hard to find former African guerrillas.

He covers the colonial oppression that drove the guerrillas, and the war crimes carried out by both sides, yet to author, these crimes only merited the label of terrorism when they were carried out by the guerrillas.

Guilherme Solari says

Cold War creeping into dying Colonialism

It's hard to grasp that Portugal had African colonies up to the 1970s, when pretty much the entire world had left the Colonial bandwagon and was more preoccupied with the Cold War. While the eyes of the world were on Vietnam, Portugal, one of the poorest countries in Europe, was waging three different wars at the same time: in Angola, Mozambique and Portuguese Guinea (today's Guinea-Bissau).

The book Portugal's Guerrilla Wars in Africa meticulously analyzes the period. South-African journalist Al Venter is a veteran war correspondent in Africa and the Middle East, and witnessed first hand Portugal's fight against it's former colonies. The book has a very good combination of factual research and the author's own perspective on the conflicts. That was essential for the understanding of someone like me, who knew squat about it. The book also comes with several photographs and maps that help a layman make sense of the conflict.

“It is difficult to tell a man's age in the bush: a 13-year-old often looks 18 or older and it was no secret that

many of those captured were barely 14 or 15, all of them armed. It was the same in old Stanleyville (today Kisangani) in the Congo: some of the worst brutalities were perpetrated by children not yet into their teens.”

It is a conflict in a different scale than Vietnam. Helicopters and bombings were rare, as were direct confrontations. The norm were cat and mouse skirmishes, of slow and constant attrition. More than all, those were wars of wills. The book defends that the Portuguese pride, that wanted to keep a self-image of a colonizing powerhouse, kept Portugal for decades stuck in a war it couldn't win. There was a crucial imbalance of determination between the colonies and Portugal.

The book describes several atrocities, perpetrated both by the government and the revolutionary groups. The first traces of distress date back to 1961, when Angolan peasants revolted because they had to sell their cotton by a price fixed by Portugal, a lot lower than the international market price. The Portuguese commanders simply bombed dozens of villages with napalm, killing 7 thousand locals.

“During bush operations, everything in their path would be destroyed; livestock slaughtered, crops and villages burnt, the local people rounded up for questioning and anyone acting in a suspicious manner arrested and hauled back to base. Tribesmen who attempted to escape this treatment were regarded as “fleeing terrorists”, and shot. The death would then be formally listed as a “terrorist kill”.”

Most of the Portuguese soldiers, young and poor, felt like they were dragged into a meaningless conflict and did the minimum necessary until their campaign was over. It is sad to see how, like in any conflict, the local population suffered the hardest blows. They were pushed both by the government and revolutionaries. It is very interesting how the book explains the guerrilla's backgrounds, many insurgents were trained in China and incorporated tactics by Mao Tse Tung and Che Guevara in the African context, like using propaganda and mobility. It's the beginning of the Cold War creeping into dying Colonialism.

It is also sad to know how these revolutions would end up after Portugal packed away from Africa. The former colonies were taken by even bloodier conflicts, that echo to this day in the continent because of the arbitrary divisions set up by the European nations.

Portugal's Guerrilla Wars in Africa is at the same time an informative and personal book about an obscure period of our recent history.
