

Portugal and Counterinsurgency: Tactics, Strategy, and their Limits in the Angolan War, 1961-1974

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From the beginning of European involvement in Africa in the early sixteenth century, Portugal established itself as a major presence on the southern end of the continent. Despite its relative economic decline and small industrial base, it had established itself as the third largest colonial power behind Britain and France during the partition of Africa. After World War Two, however, as the colonial powers gradually withdrew from Africa, the Portuguese government, under the dictator Antonio Salazar, was determined to retain what it regarded as overseas provinces of Portugal at any cost. Consequently, when insurgencies were fomented within its colonies, the government undertook an extensive counterinsurgency campaign in order to quell them. Perhaps the most notable of these insurgencies, both because of its scope the Portuguese tactics employed there, was that of Angola. From 1961 to 1974, Portugal undertook a counterinsurgency campaign that, despite its ultimate failure, produced noteworthy successes, given the relative size and economic strength of Portugal.

For the most part, European powers were unwilling to abandon their colonial holdings in the face of indigenous African independence movements; Portugal was an exception. For Portugal, its African possessions were key to its status as a European power as well as its economic survival. Compared to the heavily industrialized colonial powers, Portugal had remained comparatively underdeveloped during the nineteenth and early-to-mid twentieth centuries.¹ It had a very small industrial base, and was somewhat infertile. Although Portugal's colonies had remained relatively underdeveloped, there had always been a possibility for overseas wealth and exploitation as had occurred in Brazil before

¹ John P. Cann, *Counterinsurgency in Africa in Africa: The Portuguese Way of War, 1961-1974* (Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1997), 14.

its loss in the early nineteenth century.² After World War Two, as foreign investment in Portugal's colonies began to increase, so did the profits reaped by Portugal proper. Indeed, while Portugal's income in 1962 accounted for some 2.5 billion (USD) Angola provided some additional 800 million dollars which increased to about 1.8 billion dollars by 1970.³

Although Portugal's intended mission in Africa was ostensibly to civilize the Africans in areas which they controlled, it was no secret that the Portuguese were one of the most oppressive of the European colonizers. Like the French, the aim of the Portuguese by the twentieth century was to transform the Africans within their colonies into fully naturalized Portuguese citizens.⁴ This plan was revitalized by Salazar and his so-called *Estado Novo*, or New State, which was determined to make the colonies productive, and consequently to transform the Africans in them as fully possible into Portuguese citizens.

The reality was a regime of gross inequality between ethnic Portuguese and African subjects. In order to receive full legal benefits, Africans and *mestiços*, who were people of mixed ancestry, had to be deemed civilized by Portuguese authorities.⁵ However, requirements for this legal recognition were stringent; indeed 97 percent of indigenous Africans in Angola over the age of fifteen were illiterate in 1950.⁶ Despite the technical possibility that an indigenous African or *mestiço* could be deemed "civilized," the reality was that racial discrimination pervaded all aspects of Angolan society, which further increased tensions between ethnic Portuguese and indigenous Africans. The result of these tensions was the formation of several indigenous independence movements which would be the main opposition groups the Portuguese fought during the ensuing conflict.

The most powerful of these groups was the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). It was founded in 1956 by the merger of the Communist Party of Angola as well as other anti-Portuguese independence movements. From about 1966, its strength numbered about 4,700 insurgents,

² Cann, *Counterinsurgency in Africa*, 15-16.

³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴ Gerald J. Bender, *Angola under the Portuguese: The Myth and the Reality* (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, 1978) 149.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 151.

mostly operating out of Zambia.⁷ This movement received substantial support from Communist forces abroad, including the Soviet Union and Cuba. Another was the UPA, which changed its name to the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) in 1963, which employed about 6,200 insurgents who operated from the Belgian Congo.⁸ The last was the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), which was a breakaway organization of the FNLA, which formed in 1966. Initially, these movements operated independently, and the insurgency was marked by internal and external struggles between the three organizations, which hindered its effectiveness.

In order to understand the scope of the task that Portugal was determined to undertake, it is useful to examine the number of troops it had available to fight, the number of insurgents it was facing, the tactical challenges the topography of Angola presented, and insurgencies that were being countered by colonial powers around the world.

Angola itself was about 1.2 million square kilometres, and had a population of about five million in 1960.⁹ It was predominantly tropical and had an inland plateau which covered approximately 60 percent of the country.¹⁰ In the North, it had a vast, which included dense woodland, swamps, rivers, and grasslands. There was also the Congo River and surrounding islands, which provided excellent cover for guerrillas who sought to transverse the border. Portugal's troop commitment to its insurgencies at the height of the conflict was about 150,000, compared to an insurgency numbering around 27,000, or about six to one.¹¹ While this difference may seem substantial, similar counterinsurgencies of the time such as the Malayan Emergency, the French War in Algeria, and the Vietnam War had troop to insurgent ratios of thirty-seven, fifty and eight to one respectively.¹² On top of that, Angola was the largest territory that experienced a counterinsurgency in this period with the exception

⁷ Cann, *Counterinsurgency in Africa*, 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹ Arslan Humbaraci and Nicole Muchnik, *Portugal's African Wars* (Great Britain: The Third Press, 1974), 15.

¹⁰ Cann, *Counterinsurgency in Africa*, 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹² *Ibid.*

of Algeria.¹³ In short, the task of the Portuguese was daunting, and few would have expected it possible to prevail against such odds.

During the late 1950s, as it became apparent that Portugal would have to fight for its African possessions, it began to modify its army and strategy for counterinsurgency campaigns. The Portuguese army was geared toward conventional nation-state versus nation-state European-style warfare, and had no experience fighting a counterinsurgency. Indeed, the army itself had not fired a shot of aggression since the limited engagements it had with German colonial forces in Southern Angola and Northern Mozambique during the First World War. It did, however, have the advantage of hindsight in that several other counterinsurgencies that involved conventional European forces had already begun and ended by 1961, notably the Malayan Emergency, the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya and the Algerian War.

Central to the formation of Portugal's military strategy for its colonies was the *Instituto de Altos Estudos Militares* (IAEM),¹⁴ which served as the primary policy maker for the Portuguese military. Throughout the 1950s it began to favour staff training at the regimental and battalion level for subversive warfare, and sent several officers to England to take courses in military intelligence, which were heavily influenced by British counterinsurgency campaigns. These officers then translated several British books on counterinsurgency doctrine which were circulated widely through the Portuguese officer corps.¹⁵ Officers were also sent to Algeria in 1959 in order to assess handling of the French counterinsurgency, and completed an extensive report regarding the nature of counterinsurgency the Portuguese should be prepared to fight.

These findings and experiences were central to the development of the *O Exército na Guerra Subersiva* (EGS),¹⁶ the strategic doctrine for military operations in its overseas colonies, which had been completed and fully established by 1960. The central tenets of this doctrine established by the British and then incorporated into Portuguese doctrine are summed up well by Cann:

¹³ Despite Algeria's size, most of the country was desert. The population, along with the fighting, was limited to coastal regions and mountains in the north of the country.

¹⁴ This translates to: Institute of Higher Military Studies.

¹⁵ Cann, *Counterinsurgency in Africa*, 40.

¹⁶ This translates to: The Army in Subversive War.

1. Disorders were suppressed with a minimum of force.
2. Successful counterinsurgency had depended on a close cooperation between all branches of the civil government and the military, and this coordination had been the responsibility of a single individual.
3. Successful counterinsurgency had depended on good intelligence, and its gathering and collation had be coordinated under a single authority.
4. Successful counterinsurgency had called for the adoption of highly decentralized, small-unit tactics to defeat irregulars.¹⁷

The Portuguese knew that the insurgency would last for a long time, and were thus concerned with keeping costs low, and using the least amount of force possible to achieve strategic objectives. Rather than destroying the militants in large engagements, it resolved to engage them in small scale but strategically relevant encounters which would eventually lead to their loss of manpower, finances, and inevitable disintegration. The EGS also recognized that the indiscriminate use of force and firepower upon the population would have ultimately negative consequences, and was to be avoided if possible. Indeed, soldiers were encouraged “to influence the population through [their] presence, calming the population and acting as a preventive measure against the growth of subversion.”¹⁸ This strategy was used not only to avoid alienating the local population to the Portuguese military presence, but also to keep the conflict reduced in size to minimize costs.¹⁹

Rather than the large troop formations employed by the Americans in Vietnam and the French in Algeria, Portugal used small, mobile infantry forces in order to combat enemy insurgents. The majority of the Portuguese army was organized into light infantry, usually in a company of 120 men which would comprise three platoons.²⁰ Their purpose was simply to “seek out and destroy the enemy on [their] terrain, using initiative, stealth and surprise.”²¹ The Portuguese also utilized helicopters efficiently in the conflict, which would be used to provide mobile cover fire for light infantry on the ground, while

¹⁷ Cann, *Counterinsurgency in Africa*, 43.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

²¹ *Ibid.*

simultaneously transporting small groups of soldiers behind the engaged insurgents to cut off their retreat.²² This strategy proved effective in remote theatres of the war.

The uprising began in earnest in the early months of 1961. On February 4, a group of armed MPLA militiamen stormed into the Luanda prison and attempted to free political prisoners, who were being held there. A number of police officers were killed, but the operation was ultimately unsuccessful. Despite this, the action had a polarizing effect on the ethnic Portuguese in Luanda and the indigenous Africans. During the funeral for the police officers, the MPLA provoked an attack on mourners, which motivated a violent response from the authorities. The Portuguese issued reprisals against Africans, and several hundred Blacks were massacred in Luanda.

Shortly after on March 15, the UPA launched a major offensive in Northern Angola in an attempt to capitalize on the confusion. Portuguese forces were unprepared for the attack in the North, and were quickly overwhelmed by the advancing militants. The militants proceeded to massacre hundreds of Europeans that they came in contact with, as well as several thousand blacks, and laid waste to the most of the infrastructure north of Luanda. Portugal responded by sending reinforcements from Luanda to quell the uprising, and engaged in an indiscriminate bombing campaign that killed around 20,000 Africans and displaced many more.²³ This action further polarized native sentiment toward Portugal, which until that time had not been violently opposed to its rule.

It was, however, a successful operation in military terms. After the initial attack by UPA/FNLA insurgents, and the subsequent napalm campaign and attacks by local vigilante Portuguese settlers, the insurgents were driven into Zaire by summertime. From that point through the mid-Sixties, insurgents were able to hold on to virtually no territory within Angola, and were limited to sporadic raids from Zaire. These typically ended when supplies ran out or they were attacked by Portuguese forces and were either destroyed or pursued back across the border.²⁴ Despite this success, the Portuguese had driven some

²² Ibid., 131-2.

²³ Ibid., 28.

²⁴ Bender, *Angola*, 158.

500,000 civilians into Zaire after their campaign to reclaim their northern provinces. The loss of the North dealt a blow to the local economy and limited the amount of manpower available for guerrilla activity.²⁵

Since the insurgents were, for the most part, operating from outside of Angola, the Portuguese devoted a considerable effort in waging a so-called “hearts and minds” campaign in order to dissuade indigenous Africans from supporting the insurgents.

These included decrees which were intended to abolish forced labour, illegal land expropriation, and other practices that contributed to the degradation of Africans and the deterioration of the rural African economy.²⁶ These reforms, however, were essentially token in nature, and were part of an extensive propaganda campaign waged by the Portuguese in order to win popular support among indigenous Africans. Population resettlement was also conducted: dispersed populations were condensed into settlements protected by barbed wire in order to prevent insurgent infiltration and help organize local defence.²⁷

While the character of the war in the North essentially remained the same for its duration, in 1966 things began to change in the East. Both the MPLA and UNITA believed that it would be necessary to actively involve the locals in the insurgency if it had any chance of success. Consequently, in late 1966 they opened a front from inside Zambia and began to infiltrate heavily into the Moxico province. Unlike the North, the Portuguese bombing attempts were not successful in driving out the insurgents, and the insurgents established themselves in the Eastern areas of the country. As soon as the Portuguese realized that the insurgents could not be removed, they involved themselves in a frantic resettlement program in which large sections of the widely-dispersed Angolan population were collected into villages and were not permitted to leave. This further alienated the population, who, unlike the villagers to the North, were more hostile toward the Portuguese and were more inclined to support the insurgents. Additionally, many of the services promised by the Portuguese within the settlements such as education and health services were not provided in any

²⁵ Bender, *Angola*, 165.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

meaningful way.²⁸ In the face of poor Portuguese treatment of the resettled Africans, guerrilla attacks in the East increased in intensity in the late 1960s and early 1970s; they drew from an increased number of resettled Africans.²⁹

In the end, the longevity of the war proved to be Portugal's undoing. Despite the fact that the war never escalated substantially after the extension of the fighting into Eastern Angola in the late 1960s, there were a number of factors that prevented Portugal from securing final victory. Firstly, Portugal was unable to completely destroy the insurgents because they could retreat to neighbouring nations sympathetic to their cause. The result of this reality was a prolonged stalemate that prevented the insurgency from gaining much ground aside from its remote holdings in the East. Portugal, on the other hand, was not able to significantly de-escalate the war to an extent that was financially and militarily tenable. By 1974, Portugal was spending nearly half of its national budget on its overseas wars.³⁰ It had completely exhausted its manpower pool within Portugal, and was unable to commit an adequate number of troops to Angola in order to drive out insurgents. In the late 1960s, the terms for conscripted soldiers were extended from two to four years, and desertion rates began to increase rapidly as the war dragged on.³¹ Wars in Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique were not going well either, which contributed to disillusionment at home. All of these factors contributed to discontent within Portugal that finally manifested itself in the coup of 1974, and Portugal's subsequent transformation to democracy.

Despite Portugal's ultimate failure in quelling the insurgencies in its colonial holdings, its style of counterinsurgency was notable in that it was effective in keeping the scale of the war low, and prevented insurgents from penetrating into areas beyond the border regions. It also proved relatively cost effective, given the size and economic performance of Portugal in comparison to other European nations that were embroiled in their own counterinsurgencies. Notwithstanding the ultimate withdrawal of Portuguese forces from Angola and its other colonies because of economic strain and domestic political change, the

²⁸ Bender, *Angola*, 172.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 178.

³⁰ Gerald J. Bender, "The Limits of Counterinsurgency in Africa: an African Case," *Comparative Politics* 4 (1972): 331.

³¹ Cann, *Counterinsurgency in Africa*, 89-90.

strategic policies and tactics employed by the Portuguese within their colonies represent a notable achievement in subversive military struggles.