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## Decolonization in Portuguese Africa

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### Abstract and Keywords

The dissolution of Portugal's African empire took place in the mid-1970s, a decade after the dismantling of similar imperial formations across Europe. Contrary to other European metropolises, Portuguese rulers were unwilling to meet the demands for self-determination in their dependencies, and thus mobilized considerable resources for a long, drawn-out conflict in Angola, Guinea, and Mozambique from 1961 to 1974. Several factors can explain Lisbon's refusal to come to terms with the "winds of change" that had swept Africa since the late 1950s, from the belief of its decision-makers that Portugal lacked the means to conduct a successful "exit strategy" (akin to the "neocolonial" approach followed by the British, the French, or the Belgians), to the dictatorial nature of Salazar's "New State," which prevented a free and open debate on the costs of upholding an empire against the anti-colonial consensus that had prevailed in the United Nations since the early 1960s.

Taking advantage of its Cold War alliances (as well as secret pacts with Rhodesia and South Africa), Portugal was long able to accommodate the armed insurgencies that erupted in three of its colonies, thereby containing external pressures to decolonize. Through an approach that combined classic "divide and rule" tactics, schemes for population control, and developmental efforts, Portugal's African empire was able to soldier on for longer than many observers expected. But this uncompromising stance came with a price: the armed forces' dissatisfaction with a stalemate that had no end in sight. In April 1974, a military coup d'état put an end to five decades of authoritarianism in the metropole and cleared the way for transfer of power arrangements in the five lusophone African territories. The outcome, though, would be an extremely disorderly transition, in which the political inexperience of the new elites in Lisbon, the die-hard attitude of groups of white settlers, the divisions among the African nationalists, and the meddling of foreign powers all played critical roles.

Keywords: Portuguese Africa, late colonialism, decolonization, counter-insurgency wars, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, white settlers, independence movements

## Coping with Post-war Changes

Contrary to other imperial formations, Portugal's African empire (the Atlantic archipelagos of Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe, and the mainland territories of Portuguese Guinea, Angola, and Mozambique) was relatively insulated from the upheavals of the global conflict that came to an end in 1945. Its two largest dependencies, Angola and Mozambique, experienced important economic changes—the demands of the Allies' war effort were behind a significant boom in the mining and agricultural sectors of the colonial economies, lifting them from the stagnation of the interwar years. The exports of coffee, sugar, cotton, sisal, palm oil, diamonds, and other commodities brought impressive gains to the metropolitan treasury and strengthened the position of the colonial bourgeoisie, who managed to extract some concessions from the central government (such as a loosening of the legislation that restricted the industrial development of the overseas territories). To most Africans, though, the war boom had the opposite effect, since it intensified the pressure on the native male population and fomented the use of “contract” (i.e., forced) labor in mines and plantations.<sup>1</sup> Foreign Protestant missionaries in those two colonies tried to raise awareness of the Africans' plight, but with little or no effect.

From a geopolitical standpoint, Portugal and its right-wing authoritarian regime (Salazar's *Estado Novo* or New State) were in a comfortable position. Although its semi-fascist outlook, and discreet collaboration with the Axis in several stages of World War II, prevented it from being invited to become a founding member of the United Nations (UN), Portugal was soon to be co-opted to the Anglo-American sphere of influence at the outset of the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> Its Atlantic islands, especially the Azorean archipelago, were singled out by military planners in London and Washington as key staging posts for an eventual US intervention in post-war Europe. This contingency was to be the main reason behind the invitation issued to Lisbon to take part in the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949—the only invitation to be sent to an explicitly dictatorial regime.<sup>3</sup> From that moment onwards, the New State secured what came to be its most important diplomatic asset—NATO membership—against political pressures from Western capitals to pursue a more reformist path, or even to come to terms with self-determination claims by native groups in its colonies.

Whereas other European powers were prepared to make concessions to autonomy aspirations, or demands for greater political freedom and social welfare, Salazar's regime was very reluctant to move in that direction. Apart from a markedly racist and condescending view of Africans (who were depicted by mainstream Portuguese colonial ideologues as “lazy,” “backward,” and “infantile”), the Portuguese premier was fearful of any precedents that might legitimize reformist demands in the metropole, where a corporatist dictatorship had been in place since the early 1930s. Any changes in the

colonial sphere, therefore, would have to be taken within a strictly paternalistic mould and proceed at a very slow pace.

The highly centralized character of the Portuguese empire survived the constitutional reforms of 1945 and 1951, the *Indigenato* laws were kept in place in the most populated colonies (Guinea, Angola, and Mozambique), and the philosophy of the “colonial pact,” which underpinned the nature of the economic rapports between the metropole and the overseas dependencies, suffered only a minor revision. Aware that the imperial idiom of previous epochs would hardly be acceptable in the post-Holocaust era, the furthest that Lisbon was prepared to go was to enact some cosmetic changes: the “empire” became the “Ultramar” (“Overseas”), the “colonies” were renamed “overseas provinces,” and access to citizenship was made available to “natives” who adopted “European” manners and acquired certain educational qualifications. This semantic operation was thought to be the best way to prevent an eventual oversight of Portugal’s imperial practices by international bodies like the UN and its affiliated agencies, such as the International Labor Organization (ILO). By opting for the “integrationist” approach, Lisbon reclaimed its old assimilationist traditions (of a very dubious authenticity, it must be noted) and tried to present its colonial rule as an inclusive, non-prejudiced, sociocultural experience, a claim to which the “Lusotropical” ideas of Gilberto Freyre, a Brazilian sociologist, were supposed to lend intellectual respectability (the notion that the Portuguese, throughout their “overseas expansion,” had showed a special propensity to mingle and interact with other peoples on a basis of reciprocity, in contrast with the “arrogant” and racially minded “Northern Europeans”).<sup>4</sup>

Until the mid-1950s, the *New State* tried hard to convey the impression that Portugal’s colonial “paradigm” was attuned to the “modernizing” drive of other European powers. Its officials, for instance, were regularly present in the meetings of organizations like the Committee for Technical Cooperation in Africa South of the Sahara, where some of the common problems and challenges faced by the colonial powers were discussed. From 1953 onwards, the six-year Development Plans (“Planos de Fomento”), delineated in Lisbon, began to allocate a certain amount of public investment to the African colonies. Until 1959, however, the basic welfare of the local populations, including their health and educational needs, was still very much neglected, the priorities being the installation of settlers from rural Portugal (in the so-called “colonatos”), and the scientific and economic exploitation of the overseas territories.<sup>5</sup> In accordance with his pragmatic instincts, Salazar was also willing to make some openings to foreign Western investors, particularly in areas in which Portugal was short of capital or technical know-how, such as the oil and mining sectors—an approach in which he tried to balance influences and avoid the preponderance of a single power.

Ironically, it would be Portugal’s accession to the UN in 1956—a milestone in the *New State*’s full international rehabilitation—that spelled the end of the near-invisibility of its colonial question. As many predicted, the UN Secretary General duly requested Portugal to submit information on the political, social, and economic conditions in its “dependent territories,” a demand that Lisbon tried to evade by saying that its “overseas provinces”

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did not qualify as such—they were all part of “Greater Portugal,” governed by the same laws of the metropole. Thus began a protracted diplomatic battle between Lisbon and the anti-colonial coalition at the UN, which was poised to become the main forum for the denunciation of Portugal’s imperial “obstinacy” and its “unholy alliances” with the supremacist regimes of Southern Africa.<sup>6</sup>

The colonialist regime in Lisbon was also becoming more exposed to criticism in the imperial “peripheries.” Even if some of the conditions congenial to the emergence of mass political movements (a developed urban context, diffusion of literacy, a measure of public freedoms) were largely absent from most of the Portuguese colonies, nationalist sentiments did begin to be articulated from the end of the 1940s. In Angola, the embryo of a nationalist intelligentsia can be said to have been formed in the late nineteenth century, partly as a reaction to the assertion of cruder forms of racism that accompanied the installation of a comprehensive colonial apparatus. This led to the degrading of the social status of a petty African bourgeoisie, the historical mediators between the Portuguese authorities and the populations of the hinterland, a class that until then had occupied important positions in the bureaucracy, army, and the Church in Angola.<sup>7</sup> Members of this group (also with some counterparts in colonies like Cape Verde, São Tomé, and Mozambique), though, were still able to retain a measure of social prestige thanks to educational opportunities, including university attendance in the metropole. In the post-war years, some of them would engage in political militancy in front organizations of the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), or even in the Party itself, a formative experience that left deep traces in their world views, political culture, and leadership style, even if in the mid-1950s there were signs of unease between their nationalist aspirations and the relatively cautious colonial stance of the PCP (a tension diffused after the Communists finally committed themselves with the goal of independence for the colonies in 1957, following Moscow’s new approach toward the “liberation struggles” in the Third World).

After 1956, several competing organizations of African nationalists emerged in Guinea, Angola, and Mozambique, or among workers living in neighboring territories such as Tanganyika, Northern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland. Even if such typologies fail to capture the nuances of a more complex reality, Patrick Chabal’s categorization of those movements as “modernizers” (those more attuned to the political vision of the Marxist left), “traditionalists” (those who claimed a greater affinity to “existing or imagined African social-political realities”), and “ethno-nationalists” (those who focused almost exclusively on the advancement of ethnic interests), remains a useful framework for analysis.<sup>8</sup> By the end of the decade, developments across Africa gave an important stimulus to these anti-colonial activists, some of whom were gathering support from newly independent African countries, and other international sponsors, from both sides of the Cold War divide. Police infiltration and repression, though, acted as a brake on their activities. After 1957, *Polícia Internacional de Defesa do Estado* (PIDE), the New State’s secret police, opened branches in all the colonies and quickly established an effective

surveillance apparatus that limited the chances of organized forms of resistance or political agitation in the urban contexts of Portuguese Africa.<sup>9</sup>

## **The Independence Wars and Portugal's Resilience**

For Portugal's colonialist regime, the 1960s started with a perfect storm of unsettling events. A series of domestic crises in the metropole (from a failed military putsch in April 1961 to a major student crisis in the following year) showed that the New State could no longer take for granted the support of key social groups, particularly the armed forces. The socialization of a number of officers in NATO circles had made some of them question the wisdom of the die-hard imperial policies of Salazar, not least because such a stance threatened to alienate the support of Portugal's main ally, the United States. These "modernizing" officers, many of them holding high positions in the Ministry of Defence, were also fearful of the country's lack of preparedness for dealing with multiple emergencies in its vast and scattered empire. In December 1961, their worst fears were vindicated when the poorly equipped Portuguese contingent in Goa, Damão, and Diu was incapable of mounting even a symbolic resistance against the military onslaught of the Indian Union—in part because Salazar's government had made the choice of concentrating the country's scarce military resources in Africa.

The decision to readjust Portugal's imperial defense strategy to the prospect of nationalist insurgencies in Africa did not prevent the outbreak of a series of uprisings in Angola at the beginning of 1961. Even though early warnings had been issued by local officials, the authorities underestimated the resentments against the harshness of the colonial exploitation, particularly in the sphere of labor relations, and the galvanizing effect of the Belgian Congo independence. The peasants' rebellion in the cotton-growing region of Malange (the Baixa do Cassange revolt of January, brutally repressed by the Portuguese security forces, with the use of airplanes and napalm), the 4th of February attempt to release the political detainees from the military prisons in Luanda (followed by police and white vigilante retaliations against the African neighborhoods of the capital), and the UPA's (União dos Povos de Angola) attacks against settler's farms in the northeastern districts forced Salazar to mobilize unprecedented military means to "pacify" the colony.<sup>10</sup>



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Figure 1. Portuguese colonial troops at the Cais da Rocha do Conde de Óbidos, Lisbon, unspecified date.

Courtesy of Fundação Mário Soares.

In a rapidly changing international environment, Portugal was also facing pressures of another sort. At the UN, the newly installed Kennedy administration of the United States signaled its disagreements with Lisbon's hard-line policies by voting in favor of two Security Council resolutions which urged its ally to introduce reforms to fulfill the requests of the

“anti-colonial” declarations approved by the UN’s General Assembly of December 1960. The outcry provoked by the heavy-handed Portuguese response in Angola also led the United States and the United Kingdom to adopt embargoes which, in theory, prevented NATO’s military equipment being used in the Portuguese colonies, adding yet another element of tension to the strained relationship between Lisbon and its allies. But even if the external circumstances seemed averse to the kind of unreconstructed imperialism personified by Salazar, the fact was that by the end of 1961 his regime had managed to control the emergency in Angola and strengthen its domestic position. The challenge of African nationalism had the effect of accelerating the “developmental drive” set in motion in the previous decade, now accompanied by some symbolic, but nonetheless relevant, political changes. The most significant of these was the abolition of the *Indigenato* system and the granting of “full citizenship” to all the empire’s subjects, thus ending the legal cover for the persistence of “contract” (i.e., forced) labor in plantations, mines, and public works in the Portuguese territories. Even if the reform was full of caveats (the duality of legal statutes would be kept in place on account of the so-called “regedorias system,” and the organization of the former “indígenas” in neighboring councils run by “traditional” chiefs), its social consequences should not be underestimated, since it stimulated the creation of new labor markets in the fast-growing urban centers of Angola and Mozambique.<sup>11</sup>

Emulating other counter-insurgency approaches, from the British in Malaya to the French in Algeria and the Americans in Vietnam, the Portuguese were also keen to adopt policies aimed at winning over the “hearts and minds” of the African populations. As in other contexts, this strategy was inseparable from objectives of “population control,” since most of the “social services” (housing, medical care, and education) provided to the native population would, preferably, take place in “aldeamentos” (“protected villages”) and “colonatos” (settlements, a number of them of racially mixed), under the close watch of the security forces, white settlers, and rural militias.<sup>12</sup>

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In the following years, new insurrections would erupt in two other Portuguese colonies. In Guinea-Bissau, the Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné Bissau e Cabo Verde (PAIGC), led by the mestizo Amílcar Cabral, launched an insurgency (1963) that turned out to be the most challenging of all the decolonization conflicts in which the Portuguese were involved, with their armed forces coming near a Dien Bien Phu-type of debacle in 1973–1974. In Mozambique, the Frente Revolucionária de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO), a movement that tried to bring together the colony’s main ethnic groups under a nation-building agenda of “progressive” and “socialist” contours, led by Eduardo Mondlane, a Mozambican who attended college in the United States, opened a new front of hostilities in 1964. Although the predominance of southern “assimilados” in the political structures of the movement gave rise to some internal tensions, FRELIMO proved to be a capable fighting force in the northern districts of Mozambique and, like Guinea’s PAIGC, was able to attain a measure of international clout by publicizing their “liberated areas” through the use of modern media and the help of Western supporters.



*Click to view larger*

*Figure 2.* Second Conference of the Nationalist Organisations of the Portuguese Colonies, Dar es Salaam, October 1965. From left to right: Amália Fonseca, Amílcar Cabral, unidentified person, Eduardo Mondlane, Agostinho Neto, Marcelino dos Santos.

Courtesy of Fundação Mário Soares.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to argue that the burden of waging a three-front counter-insurgency conflict was simply too heavy for Portugal, the most backward Western European economy of the 1960s and 1970s. Even though such conflicts were of a “low-intensity” character, they still represented a huge challenge for a country that was witnessing a considerable drain of its male population on account of a surge in

emigration (it is estimated that one million Portuguese left for Western Europe between the early 1960s and 1974), and was pressed to modernize its economic infrastructure and social services (in 1970, 45 percent of its budget was allocated to “national defense”). At the end of the conflict, in 1974, Portugal, a country of approximately 8.7 million inhabitants, was mobilizing 217,000 men, 69 percent (149,000) of them deployed in the colonies—a percentage of its population only surpassed by the two Vietnams and Israel.<sup>13</sup>

And yet, until the early months of 1974—already a decade since the dismantling of European colonial rule across most of the continent—few observers were ready to predict an imminent demise of Portugal’s African empire. Even if the military situation was fast deteriorating in Guinea-Bissau, the Portuguese were still able to control the main urban

centers against an enemy that lacked armored vehicles or air power. In Mozambique, FRELIMO was indeed able to exploit some of the pitfalls of Portugal's counterinsurgency approach to take its activities from the Maconde plateau, in Cabo Delgado, to the central areas of the territory (including the Tete region, where the Portuguese were building the huge Cahora Bassa dam, at the mouth of the Zambezi River), but it never came close to capturing a major town or destabilizing the economic life of the colony.<sup>14</sup> The strategic balance in Angola, though, was considerably more favorable to Portugal. Here, the white settler population (280,000 inhabitants) comprised 5.1 percent of the total population in 1970 (it would rise to 335,000 in 1974), operating within an economy that had been experiencing a veritable boom since the late 1960s (the so-called "Angolan miracle"), pulled by dynamic sectors such as the oil and mining industries, coffee, cattle, and a number of light industries. This economic surge greatly encouraged the Portuguese to fight hard to retain their "crown jewel," an effort that was much facilitated by the intractable divisions among Angolan nationalists, who were split between the "modernizers" of the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) and the "traditionalists" of the Frente Nacional da Libertação de Angola (FNLA) and the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA). By the early 1970s, it could be said that Portuguese propaganda was not far from the truth when it claimed that the territory was largely "pacified." Apart from small pockets of guerrilla activity in places like Cabinda or the Eastern districts, Angolan independence groups spent more time fighting each other rather than the Portuguese, with some of them, like Jonas Savimbi's UNITA, forging secret pacts with the Portuguese military.<sup>15</sup>

Significantly, Portugal was also able to alleviate the recruitment pressure on its metropolitan population by incorporating a growing percentage of Africans in its armed forces in all three territories: by 1973, in Guinea, they totaled approximately 6,425 (against 7,000 guerrillas), and in Angola they were 27,800 (against 10–15,000 guerrillas), whereas in Mozambique they numbered 27,500 (against 9–11,000 guerrillas), but these figures do not include all the "irregular" or "auxiliary" African troops that were employed alongside the regular army (and may well inflate the number of the nationalist guerrillas).<sup>16</sup>

## The Absence of an Exit Strategy

Nevertheless, by the late 1960s, the notion that Portugal's future was hostage to a solution to its imperial stalemate became the fundamental political issue in the country, particularly after Marcelo Caetano took office in September 1968, following Salazar's physical incapacitation. Perceived as a modernizing reformist, Caetano was in fact an old New-State insider, with a long record of contributions to the building of the corporatist apparatus, and active participation in key areas of government (including the colonial portfolio, which he held from 1944 to 1947), even if he cultivated the image of a more "flexible" political operator. Some of his supporters were pro-European young

technocrats who viewed the enlargement of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973 as an opportunity for Portugal to redefine its options and start planning for a post-imperial role. Since the late 1960s, foreign trade statistics had highlighted the growing importance of the Western European partners (those in the EEC and the European Free Trade Association, or EFTA) for Portugal's economy, in contrast with the diminishing relevance of the imperial connections.<sup>17</sup> Even if the "pro-European" views had to be presented *sotto voce*, they were now becoming increasingly popular among the more outward-looking sectors of Portugal's economic elites, including the oligopolies that no longer considered the protectionist colonial policies of the New State as critically important to their interests. Access to European markets and financial centers was now seen as more significant to their international strategies than the "Portuguese Economic Space," the scheme launched in the early 1960s which aimed at deepening the relations between the metropole and the overseas territories. Although some of these economic groups had extensive investments in Africa, they appear to have favored a "neocolonial" approach that safeguarded their interests and influence.<sup>18</sup> After all, this seemed to have been tried with a measure of success by other former colonial powers in Africa (particularly by France) and was the basic idea behind American diplomatic approaches to Salazar in the early years of the colonial wars. The most significant of these was the one carried out in 1963 by a high-profile Kennedy emissary, George Ball, who presented the Portuguese with a plan for a ten-year disengagement from Africa, financially sponsored by international institutions, which would allow them to train "trustworthy" local elites to assume control upon Portugal's departure. As on other occasions, Salazar declined the offer, arguing that such schemes would not serve his country's interests—Portugal, he confided to one of his collaborators, the hard-line minister Franco Nogueira, could not decolonize because it was too poor to neocolonize.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, relinquishing its political control could have fatal consequences for its long-term prospects in the colonies; the only sensible option, according to Salazar, was to soldier on and expect that the pace of economic development would gradually demoralize its enemies. Although less pressed by Portugal's Western allies—his six-years tenure (1968-1974) would coincide with Nixon's presidency and the latter's extremely benevolent stance toward the white regimes in Southern Africa—Caetano was not sure that he could indefinitely postpone political changes in the empire. In 1971-1972, a constitutional reform introduced a measure of decentralization in the imperial structures and, symbolically, Angola and Mozambique were rebranded as "states." But otherwise, this was seen as a largely cosmetic operation, which fell short of making a decisive gesture toward self-determination. The "veto-players" of Portuguese politics—the hawkish elements of the armed forces and their allies in the security apparatus and pro-empire business circles—successfully prevented Caetano from exploring a bolder approach to the colonial stalemate.<sup>20</sup>



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Figure 3. General António de Spínola holding a Press Conference, January 21, 1974.

Courtesy of Fundação Mário Soares.

Ironically, the last attempt to regain the initiative, from a pro-empire point of view, would belong to a high-profile officer, general António de Spínola, who had tried to salvage Portugal's position in Guinea-Bissau during his mandate as governor (1968–1973), initially through an aggressive “hearts and minds” campaign, and then by exploring a dialogue with the PAIGC with the mediation of Senegal's president, Léopold Senghor. In February

1974, Spínola authored a book, *Portugal e o Futuro*, that advanced a “solution” for the country's colonial conundrum: the recognition of the overseas provinces' right to self-determination through “democratic consultations” that would allow the populations to express their desire to become independent, or remain attached to the metropole, via the creation of a Portuguese-speaking community. To a large extent, this scheme was remarkably close to the one drawn up by Marcelo Caetano himself, in 1962, when he was enjoying a sabbatical from ministerial politics, but he would later dismiss it as “unrealistic.” Like other Western statesmen during the Cold War, Caetano had also become mesmerized by the “domino theory,” which tended to view communism and nationalism as two sides of the same coin, and he was therefore reluctant to make a meaningful gesture toward the internationally accepted concept of self-determination. In the early months of 1974, PAIGC's bold diplomatic maneuver—the request for the recognition of its “state” proclaimed in the “liberated area” of Madina do Boé—had already secured an impressive number of votes at the UN—an event that, together with its own military achievements, would help to undermine Portugal's pretensions of administering a cross-continental empire, from “Minho to Timor.”<sup>21</sup>

## Transfers of Powers and Civil Wars

Although Spínola emerged from the coup d'État of April 25, 1974 as the face of the “National Salvation Junta,” which was supposed to steer the country toward democratic elections, it did not take long for him to realize that his plans for decolonization through referenda were not welcomed by the junior officers who were the real force behind the

movement that toppled Caetano's dictatorship.<sup>22</sup> The demise of Spínola's plan was a product of the tactical convergence between the captains and majors who controlled the Armed Forces Movement (MFA in its Portuguese acronym), both in the metropole and in the colonies, and the leaders of the African guerrillas: they were both uncompromisingly hostile to any solution that did not contemplate direct negotiations leading to a transfer of power agreement, followed by a proclamation of independence. With a more realistic appreciation of the balance of forces on the ground, the junior officers of the MFA had in the meantime developed a strong empathy for the claims of the nationalist movements, particularly those of a Marxist persuasion. To this must be added the lack of enthusiasm for Spínola's ersatz empire in the international sphere. The Organization of African Unity (OAU) showed its outright disapproval of such a project, deeming it contrary to the spirit of the anti-colonial declarations of the UN, while the liberation movements and their supporters denounced it as a "neocolonial" cabal put forward by a man who had been one of Portugal's most notorious imperial proconsuls. But even among Portugal's Western allies (the United States included), the response was lukewarm, to say the least. If France under De Gaulle had failed to lure its African colonies into an equivalent project in 1960 (the French Community), it seemed unlikely that a weaker power like Portugal, in a context of greater enthusiasm for a "revolutionary" approach to decolonization, would be able to pull off such a scheme. The overarching international consensus pointed to the solution favored by the MFA and the liberation movements: direct negotiations of the metropolitan government with "valid interlocutors" to sort out the practical arrangements for an orderly transfer of power, legitimized (or not) by democratic procedures. For a while, Spínola tried to use his domestic prestige to retain the initiative, instructing his envoys to drive a hard bargain with the African nationalists. But events soon proved that his approach rested on very shaky foundations. On the one hand, his authority over the local contingents of the Portuguese armed forces was weak: whenever the talks reached an impasse, the powerful MFA assemblies in Guinea, Angola, and Mozambique lost no time in issuing ultimatums to Lisbon demanding a speedy conclusion of the negotiations and the recognition of the territories' right to full independence. On the other hand, Spínola also came to realize that he could not depend on local coalitions of "third force" parties (i.e., African politicians not aligned with the liberation movements) and organizations of white settlers. The swiftness of Spínola's debacle owed a lot to this latter factor—Portugal's colons were in a much weaker position than their counterparts in other places (Algeria or Rhodesia), in that their marginalization from key posts in the military and administrative apparatus deprived them of real political experience. Whenever they tried to make their voice heard during the transition period, their interventions were characterized by a mix of amateurism and recklessness (most notably in Mozambique, where they tried to stage a counter-coup to cancel the agreement reached between the metropolitan government and FRELIMO on September 7, 1974), a fact that helped to strengthen the hand of the MFA and the liberation movements.

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The endgame for Spínola happened in the final days of July 1974, when he was finally forced to promulgate a constitutional law (7/74) that recognized the overseas provinces' right to self-determination, "with all its consequences, including independence." This cleared the way for the celebration of agreements between the representatives of the liberation movements in Guinea and Mozambique, as well as with the party in São Tomé and Príncipe, which the OUA and the UN had recognized as a "legitimate" interlocutor for a negotiated settlement, the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé and Príncipe (MLSTP). In a last-ditch effort to retain Portugal's influence in Angola, and bearing in mind the rivalries among the local nationalists, Spínola would still try to find support for a "global plan" for the territory's decolonization, to take place in three years, under the supervision of a "provisional coalition government," in which the white settlers would be represented and allowed to take part in the democratic consultations. But, once again, this eleventh-hour attempt to salvage Portugal's influence in its "crown jewel" collapsed in the face of the consistent opposition of one of the main Angolan liberation movements (MPLA) and its allies in Portugal and in the international arena.<sup>23</sup>

The independence agreements signed between August 1974 and January 1975 followed a relatively similar script. Portugal accepted that its former colonies would be fully sovereign states, ruled by constitutional provisions defined by their own institutions, without any interference from the former metropole. In the cases of Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique, this meant acknowledging the hegemony of PAIGC and FRELIMO, respectively; no mention was made as to how the state institutions of the new countries would be established. In the cases of Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe, where no armed struggle had occurred, and the concept of "revolutionary legitimacy" would be more difficult to apply, it was possible to set out procedures for the election of constitutional assemblies. But the outcome did not diverge from the one achieved in the former territories: the Partido Africano para a Independência de Cabo Verde (PAICV, the sister party of PAIGC) and the MLSTP were assisted by the local MFA committees in dominating the democratic process and laying down the constitutional foundations for one-party states, intolerant of opposition and committed to the "building of socialism" along strict statist lines. In the case of Angola, the already mentioned rivalries among the three main independence movements made the organization of elections, along with the demobilization of their armed wings, the cornerstone of the Alvor accord (January 15, 1975), the only independence agreement signed on Portuguese soil.

In the two territories where the European settlers formed a small, but significant, nucleus of the population—Angola and Mozambique—there would be no provisions for anything resembling a "minority status" (as was the case in other decolonization processes, like the Algerian), but they could, nevertheless, enjoy full citizenship rights upon renouncing their Portuguese nationality. Lisbon's acceptance of Africans who could qualify as Portuguese citizens after the severing of the colonial ties, though, was much more restrictive. In July 1975, a new Nationality Law was enacted to prevent what many feared might be a mass inflow of Africans who would invoke their previous condition of Portuguese citizenship to apply for a Portuguese identity card: the new law determined that only those who could prove a European lineage (up to their grandfathers) would find

themselves in that situation (a very small minority), therefore contributing to a new “racialized” concept of citizenship (again, very much in line with what had happened in France after 1962).<sup>24</sup>



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Figure 4. Independence ceremonies, Praia, Cape Verde, July 5, 1975.

Courtesy of Fundação Mário Soares.

In most cases, the independence ceremonies took place in an atmosphere of great optimism, almost euphoria: the points of contact between the utopian projects of the Portuguese left and the new African leaderships seemed to augur a postcolonial relationship free from the pathologies of the “flag independencies” of the 1960s—a kind of

lusotropical avatar with socialist trappings. Amid the festive mood, the expression “exemplary decolonization” was coined by left-wing enthusiasts: Portugal would henceforth resume its role with the former colonies by acting as “bridge builder,” a mediator between the new African nations and the rich, industrialized “North,” now that the developing countries from the “global South” were attempting to gather support for a “New International Economic Order.”<sup>25</sup>

## An Unexceptional Decolonization

Realities on the ground soon dashed many of these inflated hopes. The dissolution of Portugal’s African empire was every bit as brutal and nasty as many other imperial endgames, and the managing of the postcolonial relationships was also fraught with incidents and misunderstandings. In the relatively “controlled” transition in Guinea-Bissau, the familiar “settling of accounts” with former loyalists took the form of summary executions of members of the armed militias that fought alongside the Portuguese, shortly after the departure of the colonial army. In Mozambique, FRELIMO followed a different approach, preferring instead to send former African members of the Portuguese special forces to “rehabilitation camps” erected in some of the most remote parts of the country.<sup>26</sup> Even in Cape Verde, a colony untouched by the violence of war, treatment dispensed to dissidents suspected of having “collaborated” with the colonial regime was harsh, with a number of them imprisoned, for a brief period, in the infamous Tarrafal camp, a former site of detention for African nationalists.<sup>27</sup> Ironically, the countdown to the civil war in Angola prevented a “harki” scenario in the country (i.e., retaliations against

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former “loyalists”), since the thousands of Angolans (as well as Congolese and Zambians) who had fought as auxiliary troops of the Portuguese up to 1974 soon became fought over by the three liberation movements, and were absorbed by their armed forces shortly after the Alvor agreement.<sup>28</sup>

The prospect of a multiracial nation-building process in the settlement colonies of Angola and Mozambique was seriously compromised during the transfer of power period. In the latter territory, the failed counter-coup of the white settlers, on September 7, 1974, was followed by more violent incidents on October 21, thereby hardening Samora Machel’s resolution to make a “clean break” with the colonial past and set up a “command economy” which would hardly be appealing to the diminishing European population (in 1976, only 10 percent of the roughly 200,000 inhabitants counted as “Europeans” in 1970 remained in the country). Hard-hit by the severing of the economic ties with Ian Smith’s Rhodesia, vulnerable to the destabilization strategies of Salisbury and Pretoria, the fledgling Mozambican state was condemned to rely on the assistance provided by sympathetic states to cope with such adversities.



*Click to view larger*

*Figure 5.* Delegates at the Alvor summit, January, 15, 1975. From left to right: Almeida Santos (Interritorial Minister), Mário Soares (Foreign Affairs Minister), Jonas Savimbi (UNITA), Holden Roberto (FNLA), Costa Gomes (Portuguese President), Agostinho Neto (MPLA) e Rosa Coutinho (High Commissioner for Angola).

Courtesy of Fundação Mário Soares.

In Angola, the road to independence would be even more chaotic, since it was compounded by the ravages of a civil war that erupted a few weeks after the signing of the Alvor accord. The three movements involved were unable to overcome the old suspicions and enmities that stretched back to the colonial era, and the agreement was most likely negotiated in bad faith by their leaders. The two which had the most to lose from a winner-takes-all

electoral outcome, the FNLA and MPLA, had been making preparations for a military showdown since late 1974, and the outbreak of violence in Luanda, in April 1975, was the inevitable consequence of decisions already taken by their respective elites. In the following months, the Portuguese High Commissioner who presided over the quadripartite provisional government (Portugal plus FNLA, MPLA, and UNITA), General Silva Cardoso, was but an impotent bystander to the tragedy which unraveled in the country. The escalation of the conflict was directly related to the interference of powerful external players, turning Angola into a major battleground of the Cold War, right into the late 1980s (in fact, the conflict would only come to an end in 2002, with the elimination of Savimbi by government troops). Enjoying the support of Cuba, the Soviet Union, and

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several other socialist states, the MPLA eventually gained the upper hand against its rivals, which enjoyed the support of Zaire, the United States, and China (FNLA); and South Africa and the United States (UNITA). On the date set for the independence ceremonies—November 11, 1975—the historic leader of the MPLA, Agostinho Neto, was able to proclaim the birth of the new state in Luanda, few days after a Cuban and Soviet intervention halted the assault mounted, from the north, by Zairian troops and foreign mercenaries, and the southern advance of the armored columns assembled by the South African Defense Force.<sup>29</sup>

The uncertainty and devastation brought by the war, and, to a lesser extent, the ambiguous rhetoric of the three Angolan parties concerning the future role of the European population in the new state, either as expatriates or as Angolan nationals, ended up contributing to the latter's mass exodus, either by car (to South Africa), or through a large airlift organized by Portugal with the assistance of several countries. The piling of their belongings in wooden carts, at the Lisbon riverfront, next to the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* and the Belém Tower, became one of the iconic images of the end of the empire. The short-lived notion of Portugal's "exemplary decolonization" had by now given way to the sober concept of "the possible decolonization" ("a descolonização possível").

Contrary to what many feared, the 550,000 "returnees" ("retornados") from Africa did not become a resentful and radicalized constituency (akin to the Algerian *pied-noirs* in France) in post-authoritarian Portugal. The majority being second-generation settler migrants, they retained strong family and neighborly connections in the metropole. Even if their repatriation occurred against the backdrop of a severe economic recession, the Portuguese authorities were able to provide them with some material assistance and integrate many of those who were colonial public servants into public administration; in the ensuing decades, studies revealed that the bulk of the "retornados" evidenced a willingness to take part in the civic and political life of the country, running for office at the local and national level in the lists of the established parliamentary parties, thus dissipating fears of a political backlash fueled by post-imperial resentment.<sup>30</sup> From the point of view of Portugal's former colonial subjects, the euphoria that accompanied most of the independence ceremonies turned out to be short-lived as well. Expectations of freedom and peace were defrauded not only by the imposition of single-party regimes, committed to "modernization" projects that left the new states at the mercy of the stringent conditions laid down by international creditors in the 1980s, but also by the continuation of civil wars, namely in Angola and Mozambique. In the early twenty-first century, Portuguese society has developed a contradictory memory of the events that precipitated the end of its imperial rule in Africa. Opinion surveys conducted in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, for example, point to a relatively stable judgement among the population. A poll conducted in 1978 revealed that 68 percent of the respondents were in favor of the independence of the colonies, but 59 percent expressed their disagreement with the way the process had been conducted and stated that the disengagement from Africa should have safeguarded "the rights" of the Portuguese nationals. In 1984 there was a very similar response (69 percent favored independence in principle, but 73 percent expressed disapproval of the way it was granted), but in 1994–1995 two inquiries

commissioned by national newspapers (*Diário de Notícias* and *Público*) revealed a strong condemnation of some of the key politicians involved in the decolonization process, with the former leader of the Socialist Party (and by then a highly popular head of state), Mário Soares, at the top of the list of those perceived as having failed to obtain a better bargain from the African nationalists.<sup>31</sup>

These ambivalent appreciations of the dissolution of the empire should not give the impression, however, that the memory of the colonial breakup was a burning issue in Portuguese politics. In fact, as one historian has perceptively observed, Portugal's imperial hangover turned out to be remarkably "mild":<sup>32</sup> unresolved issues related to the decolonization process were very much present in the political agenda, but not to the point of threatening the stability of the newly restored democracy. The parties which dominated the political landscape until the late 1990s had all been in favor of the independence of the African colonies, even if those on the right were, at times, tempted to denounce the "Thiers-Mondisme" of the left-wing officials who had celebrated the socialist orientation of the new lusophone African states. But it would be wrong to read too much into this. Portuguese policy vis-à-vis its former African colonies has had its nuances in the last forty years (with the right usually being seen as "abler" to manage the postcolonial relationships on a more pragmatic basis), but it has also rested on some sound consensuses, such as the need to make its former imperial connections a key foreign-policy asset, particularly in its rapports with the European Union, of which Portugal became a member in 1986.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, a great deal of diplomatic efforts was put in motion in the mid-1980s to set up a forum of the Portuguese-speaking nations, in the hope that it could serve as a vehicle for the diffusion of Portuguese influence, a kind of "geolinguistic empire."<sup>34</sup> The result of those efforts, the Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa (CPLP—the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries), established in 1996, can hardly be characterized as a "neocolonial" initiative, though, given the structural weaknesses of the former metropole—a fact that has been made clear throughout the Community's trajectory, with Brazil and other African states rallying against Lisbon in some critical decisions (such as the admission of Equatorial Guinea in 2014).

Nevertheless, the apparent "success" obtained by Portugal in launching the CPLP (whose headquarters are based in Lisbon), and the resilience of the personal, economic, and cultural ties with its former African dependencies, has become a defining trait of the country's postcolonial identity. The revamping of Portugal's self-image has to a large extent relied on the idea that "Europe" was a key external stimulus for its modernization, after decades of isolation and backwardness; but many believe that if something singles out Portugal in the international arena, it is its repertoire of cross-continental connections forged throughout its "overseas expansion" (a point very much emphasized during the Expo-98 world exhibition in Lisbon, dedicated to the theme of the "Oceans"). But with its lusotropical undertones, this self-image has had the perverse effect of preventing Portuguese society from carrying out a much-needed critical examination of its imperial myths. The "physical decolonization," which came symbolically to an end with the sale of the majority of Portugal's stakes in the Cahora Bassa dam to the Mozambican state, in

2006, has yet to be completed by an equivalent “mental decolonization.” As some observers have noted, that can only come to full fruition when the nationalist bias of Portugal’s “official” imperial narratives is properly questioned, including the notion that racial prejudices are not a serious issue affecting present-day Portuguese society and its relation with the African communities, which have settled in the country since the 1960s.<sup>35</sup>

## Discussion of the Literature

The study of the decolonization of Portuguese Africa, approached from a long-term perspective, has not generated a large body of literature, but inquiries since the early twenty-first century have started to fill in important gaps and introduce new questions.

For reasons that had to do with the lack of a free academic environment in Portugal (and its overseas territories) until 1974, and with the emotional response which the topic elicited in post-revolutionary Portugal, the first serious probes into the subject were carried out by international authors, most of them established in the United States or in the United Kingdom. Kenneth Maxwell, who produced several first-hand accounts of the Carnation Revolution, wrote the first comprehensive overview of the “transfer of power” stage of lusophone Africa’s decolonization in Prosser Gifford and Wm Roger Louis’s comparative survey of imperial endings in Africa.<sup>36</sup> Many of the key insights of this essay would later appear in Maxwell’s landmark account of Portugal’s transition from authoritarianism to democracy, in which the reciprocal influences of the decolonization crisis and the revolutionary process in the metropole are aptly analyzed.<sup>37</sup>

The second major contribution came from Norrie MacQueen, who in 1997 published what might still be regarded the standard English language survey of Portuguese Africa’s decolonization, carefully assessing the impact of the three “classic” dimensions in the process: the metropolitan, the colonial and the international.<sup>38</sup> The book provides an account of the political transition in each of the five territories and offers an authoritative assessment of the independence aftermath in those countries and of Portugal’s re-engagement with its former colonies after 1975 (a topic on which the author has written extensively<sup>39</sup>). A third important overview is provided by a Portuguese author, António C. Pinto, whose work *O Fim do Império Português* (2001) is also structured around the analytical triptych that inspired MacQueen, but gives additional weight to the interplay between Portugal’s late-colonial crisis and the international factors. An edited volume by F. Rosas, M. Machaqueiro and P. A. Oliveira, *O Adeus ao Império. 40 Anos de Descolonização Portuguesa* (2015) provides an overview of the metropolitan, colonial, and international perspectives, while also taking stock of two issues that have recently generated more attention: the fate of the “returnees,” and the construction of the memory of the decolonization endgame.

An emerging topic in the international literature on decolonization—namely, the continuities between the late-colonial period and the nation-building projects that came after—is also beginning to draw the attention of scholars working on the lusophone African world. The case of Angola may be approached through Marisa J. Moorman's groundbreaking study of popular music and nationalism,<sup>40</sup> while Cláudia Castelo, Omar Thomaz, Sebastião Nascimento, and Teresa C. Silva's edited volume,<sup>41</sup> and Amélia Souto's monograph, cover various aspects of Mozambique's late-colonial experience.<sup>42</sup> Another major trend of the international history of empires—the comparison between different imperial formations—has been recently explored by Miguel B. Jerónimo and António C. Pinto in *The Ends of European Colonial Empires* (2015), with some thought-provoking essays on the Portuguese case.

Concerning the origins, projects, and impact of the independence movements in Portuguese Africa, some works produced in the 1970s and 1980s still retain significant insights, such as John Marcum's work on Angolan nationalism,<sup>43</sup> and Patrick Chabal's pioneering biography of Amílcar Cabral.<sup>44</sup> Chabal was also the editor of a volume on the history of postcolonial lusophone Africa, with an introduction providing a theoretical analysis of the liberation movements and their nation-building projects.<sup>45</sup> More recently, Eric Morier-Genoud's edited volume *Sure Road: Nationalisms in Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique* (2012) has widened the analytical scope of the topic, including a contribution on white-settler nationalism in Angola, a theme that has been consistently studied by Fernando Tavares Pimenta.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, some of the key independence movements of lusophone Africa, such as Angola's FNLA and UNITA, or even Mozambique's FRELIMO, have yet to be the object of scholarly monographs (like the one devoted to the MPLA by Jean Michel Mabeko-Tali<sup>47</sup>) that may enlighten us on crucial aspects of their trajectories, from the nature of their internal disputes to the complex relationship of their leaderships with external sponsors.

The international setting is also one of the dimensions that has generated a certain amount of interest since the 1990s, with various monographs covering the network of bilateral relationships that allowed Portugal to sustain outside pressures to decolonize. Luís N. Rodrigues and Whitney Schneidman cover the role of the United States;<sup>48</sup> Pedro A. Oliveira the role of Britain;<sup>49</sup> Rui Lopes the role of West Germany;<sup>50</sup> and Aniceto Afonso and Carlos Matos Gomes,<sup>51</sup> Luís Barroso,<sup>52</sup> and Filipe R. Meneses and Robert MacNamar<sup>53</sup> have explored the complicities between Portugal and the white regimes of Rhodesia and South Africa. A good sample of these inquiries can also be found in a special issue of *Portuguese Studies* (2013), organized by Miguel B. Jerónimo and António C. Pinto.<sup>54</sup> Recognition is also due to two works that have highlighted the role of Cuba and the USSR in some of the liberation struggles in Portuguese Africa: Piero Gleijeses's *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington and Africa 1959–76* (2003), and Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (2005). Introductions to Guinea-Bissau's, Cape Verde's, São Tomé and Príncipe's, and

Mozambique's transitions to independence can be found in works by A. E. Duarte Silva,<sup>55</sup> José V. Lopes,<sup>56</sup> G. Seibert,<sup>57</sup> and M. Hall and T. Young.<sup>58</sup>

Finally, Portugal's idiosyncrasies in coming to terms with its postcolonial condition, and particularly its reluctance in questioning some of the myths which underlie its late-colonial and postcolonial experiences, are discussed in Elizabeth Buettner's *Europe After Empire: Decolonization, Society and Culture* (2016).

## Primary Sources

Sources for the study of the decolonization of Portuguese Africa can be found in different countries, both in public and private archives.

In Portugal, the main official repositories are the National Archives of Torre do Tombo (which contain the Salazar and Caetano archives, the PIDE archives, as well as the records from the intelligence services of Angola and Mozambique), the Arquivo Histórico-Diplomático, the Arquivo Histórico Militar, and the Arquivo da Defesa Nacional, all of them operating under the "thirty-year rule" which regulates access to state papers. Two important non-official archives are the Mário Soares Foundation (which holds Soares's papers, as well as a number of archives from Lusophone African nationalists), and the Centro de Documentação 25 de Abril (which holds the papers of several MFA officers involved in the decolonization process, as well as archives from anti-colonial militants). An oral history project at the Portuguese Institute of Social Sciences (ICS) conducted in the late 1990s, "Arquivo Descolonização Portuguesa," has gathered testimonies from a wide variety of Portuguese protagonists of the transition to independence in several territories (both civilian and military), and is now available online.

In the lusophone African countries, the Arquivo Nacional de Moçambique (Maputo) stands out as the best organized repository, but in all of them access to the archives of the liberation movements (and the hegemonic parties in their respective countries for decades to come) remains difficult.

The release of documentation under the "thirty-year rule," or under Freedom of Information legislation, in several countries, has nevertheless allowed historians to gain access to a significant variety of sources, mostly of diplomatic nature, that bring light to different aspects of the imperial endgame in Portuguese Africa. This is the case of the US National Archives and Records Administration (College Park, MD) and several Presidential Libraries, the British National Archives (London), the French Diplomatic archives (Centre des Archives Diplomatiques, Nantes), or various South African archives (Department of Foreign Affairs, Department of Defence), to name but a few. State or party archives from the former Soviet bloc or Cuba have been used by authors like Westad and Gleijeses, but new restrictions to the Soviet materials were afterwards put in place by the Russian authorities. Finally, this brief list of repositories should also include

the archives of the United Nations (New York), the main arena of the decolonization debates since the 1950s.

## **Links to Digital Materials**

**Fundação Mário Soares/Projecto Casa Comum.**

**Project Aluka.**

**Decolonization Archive—Institute of Social Sciences (ICS—Portugal).**

**25th Of April Documentation Centre—Coimbra (Portugal).**

**Project Angola Nos Trilhos da Independência.**

**Mozambique History Net.**

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