The United Kingdom and the Independence of Portuguese Africa (1974-1976): Stakes, Perceptions and Policy Options

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Although some research into the nature of the United Kingdom's involvement in the final years of Portuguese rule in Africa has been recently carried out, the British role in the hazardous transition to independence in some of the Portuguese colonies immediately after the Carnation revolution of 1974 has until now received little or no attention, at least as far as historical literature in English is concerned[1]. This article seeks to fill that gap. It will start by sorting out the reasons behind the United Kingdom's policy of even-handedness with regard to the conflicts in Lusophone Africa up to 1974, which is essential to understand some of the limitations which the Labour government had to face in the period following the collapse of Portugal's colonial regime. After a brief description of London's expectations regarding the different 'roadmaps' for a transfer of power in Portuguese Africa, the article will focus on the two cases which possessed the greatest relevance to British interests: Mozambique and Angola. There was an interesting contrast in the way British diplomats and decision-makers assessed the implications of a 'Marxist' triumph in Maputo and in Luanda. Thus, while the FCO made a positive evaluation of FRELIMO's ascendancy in Mozambique, taking quick steps to establish friendly relations with Samora Machel's movement, it displayed a much cooler attitude vis-à-vis the MPLA[2] (a party which, since the 1960s, had kept a few links with the Labour party and allied organizations), and made significant overtures towards one of its main rivals, UNITA,[3] led by Jonas Savimbi, who by 1974 had acquired a somewhat dubious reputation among sectors of the European Left.[4] Drawing on recently released sources, this article will try to make sense of this dichotomy in the light of the analysis produced by British officials concerning: i) the leadership abilities of the main groups vying for power in Angola and Mozambique; ii) the implications of the situation in the two territories for the evolution of other Southern African conflicts (particularly the Rhodesian

[1] Notable exceptions are Glyn STONE's articles, 'Britain and the Angolan Revolt of 1961', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 27, nº 1, 1999, and 'Britain and Portuguese Africa, 1961-65', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 28, nº 3, 2000.
[2] Movimento para a Libertação de Angola.
[3] União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola.
[4] On Savimbi's reputation among the British left, see Michael WOLFERS & Jane BERGEROL, *Angola in the Frontline*, London: Zed Press, 1983.

one); iii) the strategic consequences that would result from the almost inevitable extension of the Communist powers' influence in the region.

The final years of the Estado Novo and the first steps of Portugal's decolonization

During the colonial wars fought by Portugal in Africa (1961-74), the United Kingdom pursued a policy of non-commitment vis-à-vis the authoritarian governments of Salazar/Caetano, hoping to strike a balance between its loyalties as a NATO ally and the need to distance itself from a regime that attracted a considerable amount of international criticism, not least from the majority of the member states of the Commonwealth.[5]

Overall, this policy was pursued by the two dominant parties in the United Kingdom. Although Labour had been extremely critical of what its leaders perceived as a misjudged tolerance of the Tories regarding the hard-line policies followed by Salazar in Angola and other territories, Harold Wilson's governments barely distinguished themselves from their Conservative predecessors in their dealings with the Portuguese authorities of the 1960s. The reason for this attitude was twofold. In the late 1960s, Portugal's colonial predicament in Africa seemed less dramatic than in previous years, at least in purely military terms, therefore diminishing the likelihood of a successful pro-disengagement démarche in Lisbon. Facing a war on three fronts in its 'overseas provinces', the Portuguese armed forces were stretched to their limits but the vulnerabilities of their adversaries were considerable, and in places like Angola—the 'Crown Jewel' of the Portuguese empire—the rivalries among the nationalist parties were such that by the early 1970s, only a tiny proportion of the territory could be said to be under the control of one of the guerrilla movements. The situation was less promising in the two other theatres, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique, where the PAIGC[6] and FRELIMO[7] had made important inroads into previously secured areas, usually accompanied by significant propaganda coups at the UN or in the Western media.[8] That said, very few contemporary observers—including Britain's diplomatic representatives in Lisbon, Luanda and Lourenço Marques (there was no British consulate in Bissau)—felt confident to predict either the willingness of the Portuguese to reach a negotiated settlement or, alternatively, an imminent collapse of Caetano's regime.

The other motive for Britain's temporizing stance is explained by the nature of its ties with Portugal. The old Anglo-Portuguese alliance, stretching back to the fourteenth century, was by now essentially a symbolic arrangement, having been deprived of much of its former strategic significance. Portugal's security needs since

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[5] For a general assessment of Anglo-Portuguese relations in this period, see Pedro Aires OLIVEIRA, *Os Despojos da Aliança. A Grã-Bretanha e a Questão Colonial Portuguesa 1945-1975*, Lisboa: Tinta da China, 2007.

[6] Partido Africano da Independência de Cabo Verde e Guiné.

[7] Frente de Libertação de Moçambique.

[8] A useful (if somewhat flattering to the Portuguese armed forces) introduction to the Portuguese war effort in Africa is provided by John P. CANN, *Counterinsurgency in Africa: The Portuguese Way of War, 1961-1974*, Westport Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997.

the inception of the Cold War were fulfilled by the United States through NATO, while its economic ties with other European countries had begun to take on much greater weight since the early 1960s. Still, Portugal's NATO membership as well as the strategic relevance of its Atlantic islands was a factor that few politicians in Whitehall chose to neglect given Britain's firm commitment to the Atlantic Alliance. There was another element that added to the delicacy of Britain's position towards Portugal's colonial idiosyncrasies: the situation in Rhodesia, where Britain's efforts to isolate Ian Smith's regime through the imposition of political, military and economic sanctions were largely frustrated by Portuguese and South African willingness to facilitate the supply of oil and other products to the rebel colony. In 1966, an incident with a Greek oil tanker near Beira had resulted in a diplomatic confrontation between London and Lisbon and the setting up of the Royal Navy's *Beira Patrol* to prevent further use of the Beira-Umtali pipeline.[9] The Royal Navy's mission was satisfactorily performed but oil kept reaching Rhodesia through alternative routes from Mozambican and South African ports. This meant that only by forcing these two countries to comply with the sanctions imposed on Salisbury could London hope to cut Smith off from external markets. Alas, this proved to be a step too far for successive British governments, which refrained from confronting the interests of the major multinational oil companies and were unwilling to alienate South Africa, their foremost trading partner in Africa. Holding the key to one of Salisbury's main transport routes, the Lourenço Marques-Malvernia railway line, Portugal would be a natural target for further sanctions that could tighten the pressure on Smith's regime, but this would probably lead to demands that South Africa be subject to the same penalty—a highly undesirable outcome for influential economic interests in the West.[10]

One of the consequences of the accommodating stance adopted by London was the great scarcity of contacts between British official circles and the liberation movements of Portuguese Africa, whether Marxist inspired or not. British diplomats in African countries where some of those movements held their headquarters were barred from entertaining relations with their leaders, even though this policy seemed to have been somehow relaxed in the early 1970s. That said, it is important to keep in mind the importance of certain non-official contacts established between the liberation movements and certain sectors of the British Left. The United Kingdom's relatively liberal policy regarding the issuing of visas to African nationalists had enabled figures like Amílcar Cabral, Agostinho Neto and Marcelino dos Santos to visit the British Isles and address meetings organized by anti-colonial groups. In 1968, a Committee for the Freedom of Mozambique, Angola and Guinea (CFMAG), was formed in London at the request of FRELIMO. It was led by the energetic radical lawyer and member of the House of Lords, Anthony Gifford, and had as its first major initiative the campaign against the Cabora Bassa hydroelectric scheme in Mozambique, and, in particular, the indirect participation of British firms and banks in various aspects of the project. Apart from acting as the formal representative of the liberation movements in the United Kingdom, the Committee promoted the visits

[9] Richard MOBLEY, 'The Beira Patrol. Britain's broken blockade against Rhodesia', *Naval War College Review*, vol. 4, nº 1, 2002, pp. 63-84.

[10] On the UK authorities' highly ambivalent attitude towards the oil sanctions imposed on Rhodesia, see Martin BAILEY, *Oilgate: the Sanctions Scandal*, Sevenoaks: Coronet, 1979.

of journalists and other individuals to the 'liberated areas' by the guerrillas, secured the distribution of informative material and propaganda and established links with parties, churches and similar organizations, such as the Anti-Apartheid Movement. Prominent figures from the Labour Left, from Judith Hart to Joan Lester and David Ennals, took part in activities promoted by Gifford's Committee and were familiar with some of the leading figures from the liberation movements affiliated with CFMAG.

All things considered, it is probably fair to say that when the authoritarian regime in Lisbon was finally overthrown by a military coup on 25 April 1974, Whitehall was relatively ill-informed regarding the ideology, organization, leadership and external supporters of the parties which seemed poised to become the major players in the transition to independence in Portuguese Africa, even if this lack of reliable intelligence was somehow compensated by the repertoire of contacts forged by one of Britain's governmental parties.

The near simultaneity of the regime change in Lisbon and the reinstatement of a Labour government in Whitehall, following Wilson's somewhat unexpected victory in the general election of February 1974, was therefore the major factor that enabled the United Kingdom to play a more relevant role than might have been expected in the dissolution of Portugal's imperial ties.[11] In its previous sojourn in opposition, the Labour Party had adopted a more militant posture regarding the continuation of the Estado Novo regime and its colonial policy, particularly in 1973. The revelation of the 'Wiriyamu' atrocities—a massacre of unarmed civilians in the province of Tete, Mozambique, perpetrated by Portuguese Special Forces—in the front page of *The Times*, and the coincidental timing of the subsequent public outrage and Caetano's official visit to London in July 1973, to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the Anglo-Portuguese alliance, gave Harold Wilson an opportunity to distance himself from Edward Heath's more accommodating stance. In a televised debate, the opposition leader stated that if returned to power, he would forward a motion for Portugal to be excluded from NATO and would take steps to strengthen his party's support for the independence movements in the Portuguese colonies.[12]

Labour's ties with the leader of the Portuguese Socialist Party in exile, Mário Soares, were also strengthened on that occasion, and a delegation from FRELIMO was invited to attend the Party's annual conference in September in Blackpool. In the run-up to the general election, various party documents and manifestos took care to address some of the suggestions put forward by its 'anti-imperialist' wing, namely the need to undertake a stronger commitment towards the liberation of Southern Africa from the grip of the white minority regimes.

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[11] On Portugal's metropolitan revolution and decolonization see Kenneth MAXWELL, The *Making of Portuguese Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, and Norrie MACQUEEN, *The Decolonization of Portuguese Africa. Metropolitan Revolution and the Dissolution of Empire*, London: Longman, 1997.

[12] See Norrie MACQUEEN & Pedro Aires OLIVEIRA, 'Grocer Meets Butcher. Marcello Caetano's London visit of 1973 and the last days of Portugal's Estado Novo', *Cold War History*, vol. 10, nº 1, 2010. On the massacre's background and impact, see Adrian HASTINGS, *Wiriyamu*, London: Search Press, 1974.

Hence, the advent of a more liberal, if still undefined, regime in Lisbon, under the aegis of a military junta headed by General António de Spínola, opened good perspectives for close cooperation between the two countries in the colonial sphere. Soares and the Socialists became key protagonists in post-coup politics in Portugal and the British authorities were able to forge a wide range of contacts across the political spectrum in Lisbon. The Portuguese officials and military held British decolonization record in high esteem and were eager to learn from what they perceived as the British experience of ending an empire in a relatively orderly fashion, as well as from their ability to build strong links with former colonies through the Commonwealth.

For the British, as well as for Soares, who in this respect articulated the consensus of the 'moderate' parties set up after the Revolution, the restoration of the democratic freedoms in Portugal, and a relatively smooth transfer of power in Africa, depended upon the new regime's ability to put an end to the wars—even if this meant sacrificing some 'liberal niceties' in the agreements to be negotiated with the liberation movements. Any delay affecting the transition of power was generally seen as likely to bring about a breakdown of order, a renewal of the confrontation between the Portuguese army and the guerrillas, or even desperate counter-coups by the white settlers. All efforts were therefore to be directed at avoiding the destabilization of the political process in Portugal due to events in Africa—this was the paramount goal of the civilian actors in Portugal, as well as of the more 'progressive' wing of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and its key political officer, Major Melo Antunes. The 'romantic' stand taken by the non-elected President of the Republic, António de Spínola, who in the early stages of his short mandate tried to impose a plebiscitary alternative to the direct transfer of power to the liberation movements, was therefore perceived as unrealistic both in Whitehall and in the mainstream British press.[13]

In the months following the coup, the British authorities essentially tried to assist Portugal in its efforts to reach an agreement regarding the future of Guinea, the colony where a military collapse seemed most likely to occur. Wilson and his Foreign Secretary, James Callaghan, a former Labour spokesman for colonial affairs, refrained from offering their good offices for any type of mediating role, but in May 1974, London become the venue for the first round of negotiations between Portuguese representatives and the PAIGC, while the British embassy in Algiers provided safe communications to the Portuguese delegation when the Algerian capital hosted the ensuing round of talks. Apart from this, the United Kingdom's only significant moves in the early stages of Portuguese decolonization were its decision to withhold the recognition of the PAIGC's self-proclaimed 'state' until the independence agreement had been signed, and its request to the members of the UN's ad-hoc commission set up in the previous year to investigate the Wiriaymu

[13] On British perceptions of Spinola's plans, see OLIVEIRA, *op.cit.*; on press comments see, for example, *The Times*' editorial 'Dismantling an Empire', 24 May 1974, and *The Economist*' leaders 'The Unendurable burden', 27 April 1974, and 'Straying to the Left', 11 May 1974.

atrocities to conduct its inquiries in a discreet manner while the thorny negotiations between Lisbon and the liberation movements were still being carried out.[14]

Placing the chips on FRELIMO

With the conclusion of the Lusaka agreement with FRELIMO on 7 September 1975, the first and decisive phase of Portugal's extrication from Africa was complete. The Algiers agreement regarding the independence of Guinea, signed on 26 August, had established a pattern for the transfer of power that would be replicated, with some local nuances, in the remaining territories. While accepting the latter's undisputed right to independence, Portugal would acknowledge the liberation movements recognized by such bodies as the United Nations or the Organisation of African Unity as the 'sole legitimate' representatives of the African populations and limit itself to making the practical arrangements leading to the termination of its sovereignty. Although in some cases these agreements included references to an electoral process (namely for the islands of Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe, where no armed struggle had ever been carried out), the Portuguese authorities showed little interest in preventing the internationally legitimized liberation movements (the PAIGC and CLSTP) from suppressing their local rivals even before the first elections had taken place.[15]

Of all the former Portuguese colonies, Mozambique was probably the one whose future had a more direct impact on British interests, as was immediately acknowledged by Harold Wilson.[16] The reason for this was, naturally, the situation in Rhodesia, where Ian Smith's government still refused to accept the principle of majority rule. Given FRELIMO's commitment to the aspirations of black nationalism in Rhodesia, it was easy to predict that the future Mozambican state would comply with the UN sanctions against Salisbury. This was a most welcome prospect to the Wilson government, whose foreign policy record had been much tarnished by its inability to suppress Smith's Unilateral Declaration of Independence in the 1960s, and who was now trying to bolster the steps taken by Zambia and South Africa to persuade the white regime in Salisbury to accept a constitutional settlement for Rhodesia.[17]

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[14] See OLIVEIRA, *op. cit.*

[15] On this process, see Norrie MacQueen, *op. cit.*

[16] The National Archives (TNA), PREM 16/241, Letter from Tom Bridges, Wilson's private secretary, to Percy Cradock, head of the Assessments Staff of the Cabinet Office, 27 April 1974, asking for an urgent study of Lisbon's National Salvation Junta orientation in terms of African policy and its likely impact in Mozambique. *The Times*' editorial of 26 April also placed great emphasis on the pivotal role of the 'Mozambican domino'.

[17] On Wilson's first government and the Rhodesian conundrum there is now a considerable number of references. See, among others, John W. YOUNG, *The Labour Governments 1964-1970: International Policy*, Volume 2, Manchester: Manchester University Press, [2004] 2009. For the second Wilson government, the '30 year rule' has delayed a similar account based on official papers. However, see Brian LAPPING, *End of Empire*, London: Guild Publishing, 1985, pp. 510-521, and Elaine WINDRICH, *Britain and the Politics of Rhodesian Independence*, New York: Homes & Meier, 1978.

The closure of Mozambique's ports to Rhodesia's foreign trade would not render the international embargo automatically effective, but would at least make the efforts undertaken by the white regime to circumvent the sanctions more expensive,[18] and at the same time allow London to discontinue the Royal Navy's *Beira Patrol*. Given that the Lusaka agreement had made no provisions whatsoever for elections, the United Kingdom's priority was to establish a working, and, if possible, an amicable, relationship with FRELIMO, who since the Lisbon coup had managed to neutralize some potential competitors, such as GUMO,[19] and survived the counter-coup carried out by extremist members of the white community on the very same day the independence agreement was signed.[20]

With the final handover of power set for June 1974, it was time to anticipate how an independent Mozambique led by FRELIMO might affect British interests and the West in general. While acknowledging FRELIMO's debts towards some of the Communist powers, British diplomats were not fatalistic enough to envision the possible absorption of Mozambique by the Soviet or Chinese sphere of influence. They were confident that Samora Machel's instinctive 'pragmatism' would prevail over the more ideologically-minded figures of the movement (such as Marcelino dos Santos, Deputy President of FRELIMO, who was well-known for his connections with Moscow and several European Communist parties), and eventually pull the country in the direction of a 'non-aligned' stance, akin to the one adopted by the majority of OAU member states. Since Mozambique would be greatly dependent on South Africa economically,[21] it was likely that Machel might feel tempted to turn against Rhodesia as a means to secure an accommodation with Pretoria. Compliance with UN sanctions would probably cost the Mozambican state something like £20 million a year (approximately 10% of the country's annual budget), but such a gesture would enable the new government to ask members of the international community to provide some compensation for those losses. According to an early FCO internal assessment, this was where the United Kingdom could step in, either through the concession of a bilateral soft loan, or by persuading its EEC partners and other Western countries to contribute to a multilateral aid package.[22] In December 1974, this forecast was confirmed by the Ambassador in Lisbon, Nigel Trench, who visited the territory and reported some of the huge challenges that Mozambique was about to face and that would constrain its foreign policy options. Trench also had the chance to make the first high-level contact with one of FRELIMO's main leaders,

[18] It was estimated that 70 per cent of Rhodesia's traffic with the outside world passed through Beira and Lourenço Marques, while two thirds of its oil originated from the refinery at Matola, close to the Mozambican capital.

[19] A political organisation set up in the last months of the colonial regime and led by an ambitious Macua politician, Joana Simeão.

[20] On the white settlers' failed coup, see A. D. HARVEY, 'Counter-coup in Lourenço Marques: September 7', *International Journal of Historical African Studies*, vol. 39, nº 3, 2006, which reproduces the dispatch with the account of the events by the British Consul in Lourenço Marques.

[21] Half of its revenue was generated by the proceeds from traffic charges paid by the South Africans, as well as from the remittances sent by migrant labourers working on the Rand mines.

[22] TNA, FCO 45/141, 'Brief for London Talks on Southern Africa. Mozambique', 28 August 1974.

Joaquim Chissano, the Prime Minister of the transitional government established by the Lusaka Agreement. Trench was generally impressed by the political realism displayed by several high-ranking figures of the movement, including their willingness to curb the masses' eagerness to reap the rewards of independence—impossibly higher wages and, more worryingly, high levels of alcohol consumption.[23]

In March 1975, the broad orientations of the United Kingdom's policy towards the future state were for the first time debated at an interdepartmental meeting at the FCO. The resulting discussion emphasised the need to counter the influence of Communist powers in Mozambique through a judicious use of aid programmes, financial assistance and other 'soft power' instruments, with the hope that such an approach might induce FRELIMO to favour a non-aligned orientation similar to that adopted by countries like Tanzania and Zambia.[24] While agreeing with the major premises of the document, the well-informed consul in Lourenço Marques, Stanley Duncan, nevertheless argued that he wanted 'more emphasis given to the advantages' that would accrue to the United Kingdom if FRELIMO held on to power for some time. If Machel's movement proved capable of preventing the country from sliding into 'anarchy and civil war' while winning the confidence of the remaining European minority, it would send an encouraging sign to the whites in Rhodesia and South Africa. Although it was possible to recognize strong authoritarian tendencies in its leadership, and a preference for an economic orientation that threatened to undermine British commercial interests in the country, FRELIMO was still 'the best hope for Mozambique, for Southern Africa and for us in the medium term'.[25]

Recognizing the importance of causing a first good impression, the British authorities made a significant effort to ingratiate themselves with Mozambique's future masters on the eve of the independence ceremonies. In this respect, the existence of certain personal bonds between elements of the Labour Party—such as Tony Benn, David Ennals, Judith Hart and Joan Lester—and the FRELIMO leadership was extremely important. The FCO was more than happy to explore the goodwill generated by those connections and in the final stages of the transition period stipulated by the Lusaka agreement, steps were taken to make the first official contact with FRELIMO's leadership in Dar-es-Salaam.

When such talks took place in April, Machel was shrewd enough to explore the more ambivalent record of previous Labour governments regarding Rhodesia, and suggested that an invitation for the United Kingdom to attend the independence ceremonies would be dependent upon London's attitude towards the behaviour of

[23] TNA, FCO 45/1538, 'Visit of H. M. Ambassador to the State of Mozambique', A. L. Free-Gore, 10 December 1974, and FCO 45/1732, 'Visit to Mozambique and Angola', Nigel Trench, 31 December 1974.
[24] TNA, FCO 45/1729, Minute of a meeting chaired by Martin Reid, head of CSAD, on the UK's future policy towards Mozambique, 3 March 1975.
[25] TNA, FCO 45/1732, 'British policy towards Mozambique', Stanley Duncan, 19 March 1975.

the Rhodesians vis-à-vis Mozambique.[26] The British authorities appear to have taken this as a sign that FRELIMO wished to secure some compensation for its commitment to the cause of black liberation in Rhodesia. Hence, an aid assistance of £15 million for Mozambique was announced at the Commonwealth summit in Kingston, Jamaica, in early May, taking the form of an interest-free loan repayable over 25 years—with no repayments over the first seven years. This offer, which could only be used for peaceful ends, was presented to Machel by the Minister for Overseas Development, Judith Hart, who some days later travelled to Tanzania for this specific purpose. As a gift for independence day, the United Kingdom was also happy to offer Mozambique four Land Rover jeeps, fully equipped to serve as mobile medical units.[27]

These conversations marked the beginning of an auspicious relationship between the two countries. Apart from the Dutch, the Scandinavians and the Portuguese, the United Kingdom was the only Western country invited to attend the independence ceremonies on 25 June at the Machava Stadium, on the outskirts of Maputo, formerly Lourenço Marques. Wisely, the government did not choose a member from the Royal Family but David Ennals, Minister of State at the FCO, former chairman of the Anti-Apartheid Movement and one of the founding members of a small committee set up in the early 1960s to support the struggle for freedom in Portugal and its colonies.[28] In Maputo, Ennals was officially received by the Deputy Leader of FRELIMO and soon-to-be Minister for Economic Coordination, Marcelino dos Santos—a gesture that was interpreted as the sign that FRELIMO saw the United Kingdom as a key player in the search for a negotiated settlement in Rhodesia. Apart from the discussion on the nature of British aid to Mozambique, Ennals' visit was also marked by a highly symbolic announcement: the termination of the Royal Navy's *Beira Patrol*, a mission that the Royal Navy had carried out with some degree of success, notwithstanding the frequent complaints about its cost and real effectiveness.[29]

In further assessments of Mozambique's political outlook, British officials seemed to harbour no great illusions as to what could be expected from Machel and his movement, particularly in the fields of human rights, the rule of law and economic governance. Machel's 'triumphal' tour from the Rovuma to Maputo, in the weeks which preceded the independence ceremonies, had left an extremely negative impression on the usually sympathetic Duncan. Instead of trying to 'bind the country together' and preach mutual tolerance between the different communities, Machel chose to make violent harangues against the 'colonialists' and their 'collaborators' (by which he meant the mulattos who had rejected the non-

[26] TNA, FCO 45/1730, Telegram from UK High Commissioner in Dar-es-Salaam, 27 March 1975.
[27] TNA, FCO 45/1730, Record of a meeting between President Samora Machel and other Frelimo leaders and the Rt. Hon. Judith Hart, MP, Minister of Overseas Development, State House, Dar-Es-Salaam, 10 May 1975.
[28] TNA, FCO 45/1730, Telegram from the Foreign Secretary to the UK High Commissioner in Dar-es-Salaam, 10 June 1975.
[29] TNA, FCO 45/1735, 'Mozambique independence: visit by Minister of State, the Rt. Hon. David Ennals, MP, 25-26 June 1975', Stanley Duncan, 26 June 1975.

assimilated Africans), and announced his plans for the nationalization of a considerable number of economic activities and services—including the medical and legal professions.[30]

FRELIMO was thus a modernizing movement bent on constructing a one-party state, driven by a mixture of puritanical zeal and utopian design (but not of the Khmer Rouge variety, as Duncan remarked), and very poorly equipped to run a modern economy. Although in some areas its sense of discipline, cohesion and sincere commitment to the well-being of the population had already brought positive results, in the economic sphere the damage inflicted by the dogmatic perspectives of some of its ideologues was already noticeable. On the other hand, Machel's insistence on imposing FRELIMO's austere communitarian model on the whole of society, including its forms of 'popular justice' (which involved the public flogging of wrongdoers, the use of 'people's' courts and the banning of private lawyers), was an extremely worrying development ('Where is Amnesty International now', asked Duncan in one of his reports)[31]. Therefore, in his valedictory dispatch from Maputo, Duncan thought that it might be premature to dismiss the possibility of Mozambique becoming another African version of *Animal Farm*:

> *Their particular mixture of nationalism and socialism is probably unique in Africa. Will it work? The signs are not good. Too many of the few worthwhile legacies of the colonial era are being destroyed while the useless (such as the stultifying bureaucracy) are being retained. All the inconsistencies we have come to associate with the Communist world are beginning to appear. And where there is nepotism can corruption be far behind.*[32]

Still, according to the same diplomat, the inclination already shown by the more pragmatic elements of FRELIMO to balance the influence of the various foreign powers with whom the movement had built a closer relationship over the years provided enough reasons for the West to feel moderately optimistic about its relations with the new African state. Britain in particular seemed well placed to become one of its trusted European interlocutors. All things considered, the record of its behaviour during the last stages of Portugal's colonialism was thought to have been generally decent, benefitting from the fresh memory of events such as the Labour Party's opposition to Caetano's visit to the United Kingdom in 1973, as well as from the links established between several British NGOs and Labour personalities and the FRELIMO leadership. As Duncan remarked shortly after the ceremonies which marked the handover of power: 'Once more we find ourselves thrust into a special position on the African stage. We may simply want to do nothing more than go home, put our feet up in Europe and thumb nostalgically through the Press cuttings of our African past: but Mozambique is demanding one more performance

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[30] TNA, FCO 45/1729, 'Samora Machel's Mozambique Tour', Stanley Duncan, 16 June 1975; see also further comments on the impact of Machel's speeches in 'Machel's Mozambique Tour', A. L. Free-Gore, 20 June 1975.
[31] TNA, FCO 45/1729, 'Mozambique: internal', Stanley Duncan, 18 August 1975.
[32] TNA, FCO 45/1730, 'Mozambique: valedictory dispatch', Stanley Duncan, 14 October 1975.

yet.'[33] Some of these predictions may have relied on a certain dose of wishful thinking, given the disastrous results of some of the economic policies carried out by FRELIMO, before and after its official conversion to Marxism-Leninism in 1977, and the general destabilization which the country had to endure as a result of the foreign intervention of the neighbouring racist regimes and the emergence of a guerrilla force (RENAMO)[34] sponsored by them. The human rights record of FRELIMO was also appalling in many aspects but, as predicted by Duncan, it never reached the level of brutality typical of other contemporary Socialist regimes in Africa and Asia. More significantly, the regime refused to become a client either of Moscow or Beijing—it took aid from various sides but was able to cultivate an autonomous line that in the early 1980s would enable it to strengthen ties with the main Western powers and the institutions in which their influence was great, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.[35]

The Angolan conflict: faux pas and belated adjustments

In certain aspects, the United Kingdom's approach to Angola's transition to independence provides an interesting contrast with that of Mozambique. Here, the splitting of the nationalists into three rival groups (MPLA, FNLA[36] and UNITA), each one with its own particular sponsors, made the formulation of a coherent policy rather more complicated, especially after the collapse of the Alvor peace process and the outbreak of armed clashes in Luanda in the late spring of 1975.[37]

The internationalization of the ensuing civil war, with military interventions by countries like Zaire, Cuba and South Africa, and all sorts of covert support provided by the USA, USSR and other powers, brought Angola to the forefront of the Cold War.[38] Throughout this period, the United Kingdom was a relatively minor player on the Angolan chessboard. Even though archival restrictions make it difficult to ascertain the real extent of the more shadowy aspects of Britain's involvement

[33] TNA, FCO 45/1729, 'Frelimo's Mozambique', Stanley Duncan, 20 June 1975.
[34] RENAMO (Resistência Nacional Moçambicana; English: Mozambican National Resistance): an anti-Communist guerrilla movement set up in 1976 with the backing of Rhodesia. It later evolved into a political organization and signed a peace agreement with FRELIMO in 1992.
[35] On the post-1975 developments in Mozambique, there are two excellent accounts: Margaret HALL & Tom YOUNG, *Confronting Leviathan: Mozambique since Independence*, London: Hurst & Co, 1997; and Malyn NEWITT, 'Mozambique' in Patrick CHABAL (ed.), *A History of Postcolonial Lusophone Africa*, London: Hurst & Co, 2002.
[36] Frente para a Libertação de Angola: the liberation movement party led by Holden Roberto.
[37] For a good introduction to the complexities of Angola's civil war see Fernando Andresen GUIMARÃES, *The Origins of the Angolan Civil War. Foreign Intervention and Domestic Political Conflict*, London: Macmillan, 2001.
[38] On the various international dimensions of Angola's hazardous independence process, see, among more recent publications, Odd Arne WESTAD, *The Global Cold War, Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Edward GEORGE, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965-1991, From Che Guevara to Cuito Canavale*, London: Routledge, 2005; Vladimir SHUBIN, *The Hot 'Cold War', The USSR in Southern Africa*, London: Pluto Press, 2008.

(particularly in the field of covert operations), it is probably right to assume that its diplomatic initiatives stand as the more relevant ones.

Having established a close working relationship with his American counterpart, Henry Kissinger, Britain's Foreign Secretary, James Callaghan, devoted major efforts to persuading the Ford administration to adopt a more accommodating stance towards the prospects of an MPLA victory in Angola.[39] As we shall see, Britain's chief motivating factor was to promote the de-escalation of the conflict and the rapid withdrawal of all foreign contingents from the former Portuguese colony, whose presence was perceived as a dangerous focus of destabilization in the region, threatening the *détente* policy undertaken by Kaunda and Vorster (there were hopes that this would unlock the impasse in Rhodesia), and increasing the tensions between East and West at a more global level. This, together with the need to protect the lives of British citizens in the country, formed the bedrock of the 'neutrality' policy proclaimed by Wilson's government shortly after hostilities broke out in Luanda.

Curiously, this had not been Britain's initial posture during the early stages of the Angolan conflict, when a bias in favour of UNITA had become pre-eminent in Whitehall—something that was at odds with the predominant pro-MPLA leanings of many Labour MPs, party activists and allied organizations. As a matter of fact, it had taken the FCO several months after the Lisbon coup of April 1974 to instruct its consul in Luanda to make the first informal contact with representatives of the liberation movements. It was only in November, when signs of significant progress in the formation of a transitional government became visible, that this step was taken, *after* consulting the Portuguese authorities, who remained as the administrative power in the territory.[40] A few weeks later, Nigel Trench, who stopped in Luanda after visiting Mozambique, held conversations with members of the three liberation movements. His impressions were not particularly positive: 'To judge from their representatives in Luanda, the calibre of the leaders of the MPLA, FNLA and UNITA is lower than that of FRELIMO, and they are certainly even less prepared and less fitted, for taking over the government of the territory.'[41] Above all, the lack of a 'unifying black nationalism', a problem regularly stressed by several British consuls in past reports, did not bode well for any political cooperation between the three movements. And, to make matters even more complicated, there were also the undefined ambitions of the two Congos towards Cabinda, home of a small separatist movement—the Frente de Libertação do Enclave de Cabinda (FLEC). Given this situation, Trench concluded that it was 'difficult to be optimistic' about the future of Angola.[42]

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[39] The close rapport between Callaghan and Kissinger is discussed in the former's authorized biography by Kenneth MORGAN, *Callaghan. A Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, which is disappointingly thin on references to Angola's decolonization. The same can be said of Callaghan's memoir, *Time and Chance*, London: John Murray, 1987.
[40] TNA, FCO 45/1505, Letter from Martin Reid to S. E. Croft, 15 November 1974.
[41] TNA, FCO 45/1732, 'Visit to Mozambique and Angola', Nigel Trench, 31 December 1974.
[42] *Ibid.*

By the end of 1974, London's policy of 'non-involvement' in Angola had not dissuaded UNITA from trying to obtain arms in the United Kingdom, taking advantage of its position along the areas crossed by the Benguela Railway, the largest British investment in Angola and a vital route for the exports of the Copperbelt mines in Katanga and Zambia. Tanganyika Concessions, the owners of the railway, and the Zambian government of Kenneth Kaunda, a long standing ally of UNITA's leader Jonas Savimbi, appear to have been UNITA's main allies in British official circles. The head of the Central and Southern Africa Department (CSAD), Martin Reid, summed up Britain's position in a communication to the High Commissioner in Lusaka which justified the reasons for not satisfying a request for arms put forward by UNITA in December: 'We would want to have no part in encouraging violence in Angola, least of all violence between the liberation movements. Any such fighting could only result in detrimental effects on the British resident community, our commercial interests in Angola, and the economy of the country itself.'[43]

But soon after the Alvor agreement was signed in January 1975, a change was discernible in British diplomatic circles. Returning from a recent visit to Luanda, Reid was no longer so sure that the fate of Angola would be determined by peaceful and democratic means. According to him, 'the independence agreement obscures the real issue of who is going to come out on top, and […] the elections, though in theory a nice tidy way of settling it, may not succeed in avoiding a trial of strength by methods to which the liberation movements are more accustomed.'[44] Of the latter, it was UNITA and the 'charismatic' Savimbi who had made a better impression, at least judging from the tone of several reports from the British consulate in Luanda. It was also clear that the assignment of the Natural Resources portfolio to UNITA in the new transitional government had made it the most sought-after player for those British economic interests with a stake in Angola's future. In March, with arrangements being made for a high profile UNITA delegation to visit London, the British High Commissioner in Lusaka strongly recommended a warm welcome to Savimbi: 'He is articulate and realistic, and clearly an outstanding leader. He is well disposed towards Britain. He is most concerned that Angola should (not) fall into communist hands, and I think we are now all agreed that it is very much a Western interest that he should become the first head of government on independence. He also has the full support of the Zambians'.[45] While in London, Savimbi and members of his delegation made contact with directors of several firms directly involved in the exploitation of raw materials, such as Tanganyika Concessions, Rio Tinto Corporation, British Petroleum and Lonhro.[46] He was also received by Joan Lester at the FCO, where he took care to stress his firm commitment towards the electoral process and project an image of good sense and moderation. When asked for his views on the region's conflicts, he expressed his

[43] TNA, FCO 45/1505, Letter from Martin Reid to F. S. Miles, High Commissioner in Lusaka, 20 December 1974.
[44] TNA, FCO 45/1674, Letter from Reid to Nigel Trench, Ambassador in Lisbon, 6 February 1975.
[45] TNA, FCO 45/1694, Telegram from F. M. Miles to FCO, 21 March 1975.
[46] TNA, FCO 45/1694, Programme for the visit of Dr. Jonas Savimbi, President of UNITA, 9-12 April [1975].

preference for the peaceful settlement of the wars in Rhodesia and Namibia, while adding that he had made an appeal to the SWAPO leader's sense of restraint. On South Africa, he stated that UNITA did not favour a policy of 'confrontation' and recognized that the whites had 'nowhere to go', a fact that in his opinion should merit full attention from all those who urged the quick dismantling of the apartheid system.[47]

Apparently, the visit brought palpable gains to Savimbi, who was now thought to be receiving financial and other help from commercial enterprises established in Angola, particularly in the southern half of the country.[48] In a communication to the British Embassy in Kinshasa that suggested inviting Holden Roberto of FNLA to pay a similar visit to London, the head of CSAD confirmed the pro-UNITA bias of the British government. While he was not opposed to such an invitation, a distinction had to be made between the two movements: 'We would want to consider carefully, however, whether we would offer to lay on for FNLA a programme with hotel bills paid; for your own information, it suited us to do this in the case of Savimbi who named firms he wanted to see and whose attitude to foreign commercial involvement is encouraging'.[49] In a clear contrast with UNITA, the leaders of the other two Angolan movements were described in British diplomatic exchanges and situation briefs as erratic, insecure and unreliable, particularly those of the MPLA which, in addition to its strong ties with Moscow, was riddled by internal divisions and incapable of imposing a measure of discipline on its reckless urban militias. It was also becoming clear to many observers that given the demographic expression of the main ethnic groups in Angola, the MPLA and FNLA would find themselves in a less favourable position vis-à-vis UNITA, which was thought to command the overall support of the largest ethnic group, the Ovimbundos, strongly concentrated in the Bié plateau in Central Angola. However, thanks to the supremacy it had been able to secure in Luanda, and the significant amount of arms received from several socialist countries, the MPLA seemed poised to undertake a large scale bid for power on the eve of the scheduled elections. Late in May, the vice-consul in Luanda had no hesitation in attributing the main responsibility for the acceleration of the exodus of the white community from Angola to the MPLA. In his view, this was the result of Neto's resentful declarations against the Portuguese settlers, and of his acceptance of the '*poder popular*' theories espoused by the more militant elements of the movement, such as Nito Alves, who demanded that arms should be given to the population of the Luanda *musseques* known to be sympathetic towards the MPLA.[50]

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[47] TNA, FCO 45/1694, Record of a meeting between the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and a Delegation from UNITA, held at the FCO, 10 April 1975.

[48] TNA, FCO 45/1694, Letter from B. J. Everett, in Luanda, to Martin Reid, 22 April 1975.

[49] TNA, FCO 45/1694, Letter from Martin Reid to R. J. Stevenson, Ambassador in Kinshasa, 2 May 1975.

[50] TNA, FCO 45/1676, Letter from B. J. Everett to P. M. H. Young, 22 May 1975. Everett was particularly harsh on Agostinho Neto, whom he described as 'a politician who cannot tell a big lie, so instead tells lots of little, half-lies'.

During the summer months, Luanda became the stage of a fierce battle between the three rival parties, which led to the departure *en masse* of the European population from Angola, and a military balance that, by the end of August, was favourable to the MPLA in Luanda and other coastal towns and provincial capitals. Due to security concerns, the British consulate was temporarily closed on 28 July and its staff evacuated in the following weeks in the large airlift organized by the Portuguese authorities. A CSAD paper conveyed the gist of British diplomatic perceptions concerning what was at stake in this critical stage of the conflict in Angola:

> *If an MPLA-dominated Government were to take power in Angola, or if chaos supervened, the situation could have a discouraging effect upon right wing opinion in South Africa and Rhodesia and in turn affect the chances of an early settlement in Rhodesia and Namibia. It could undermine the whole 'détente' process, which at present offers the best chance of securing peaceful solutions to the problems of Southern Africa generally. An MPLA victory could inaugurate a stormy relationship between the Governments of Angola and Zaire, since President Mobutu's support for FNLA has been total. He has designs upon the oil-rich enclave of Cabinda. President Kaunda is concerned, partly because Zambia relies heavily on the Benguela Railway, partly because of his interest in détente, and partly because of the repercussions of any adventures which President Mobutu might start.*
> *The British and general Western interests will be adversely affected by the intrusion of Iron Curtain influence into Southern Africa through the links established with Frelimo in Mozambique and the MPLA in Angola. Otherwise, British interests in Angola are relatively small.*[51]

Even though traces of a British governmental effort to bolster UNITA's chances at this critical juncture are hard to track down in the National Archives, there are indications that some covert assistance may have been organized by the MI6 officer in Lusaka, while it is most likely that Zambia served as a front for the shipment of arms and ammunitions to Savimbi. Additionally, Lonrho, owned by Tiny Rowland, a businessman with close ties to the Labour Party, is credited with an important role in providing an air service between Zambia and some of the areas controlled by UNITA in Angola.[52]

With the escalation of the fighting and the meddling of an impressive number of outside players, Angola became a classic Cold War theatre with each warring faction acting as a proxy for a powerful sponsor. On the eve of the day scheduled for independence (11 November), a strategic stalemate appeared to have been reached. The MPLA held on to its strongholds in Luanda and Benguela, but was being forced to cope with a two front threat: an assault on Cabinda undertaken by a joint force of FLEC and Zairian troops, soon followed by a South African pincer movement against Luanda involving two heavily armed columns ('Zulu Force' and 'Foxbat'),

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[51] TNA, FCO 45/1685, Paper 'Angola', Martin Reid, 17 July 1975.
[52] See Jonathan BLOCH & Patrick FITZGERALD, *British Intelligence and Covert Action. Africa, Middle East and Europe since 1945,* New York: Brandon, 1980, pp. 192-193.

composed of an assortment of Angolan troops who had fought with the Portuguese (Bushman soldiers), UNITA elements, South African regular soldiers and various foreign mercenaries. Neto was able to proclaim the independence of Angola the day after the last Portuguese High Commissioner left Luanda, but otherwise he had few reasons to celebrate. His extremely adverse position was only saved by the massive help supplied by Cuba ('Operation Carlota'), the Soviet Union and other Socialist countries—this involved the deployment of several thousand foreign troops in Angola, mostly of Cuban origin. This fact raised British apprehensions regarding the future of Angola but also of the whole Southern Africa region and East-West détente in general. However, it soon became clear that it would not be easy to bolster the MPLA's rivals, with the hope that a military stand-off might force Neto to accommodate them in a future coalition. Press revelations regarding the covert CIA operation in Angola, and the public awareness of South Africa's military intervention, strongly suspected of having received Washington's blessing, tilted the majority of the so-called 'moderate' OAU members towards the MPLA.[53]

These developments, and South Africa's intervention in particular, forced the British to review their expectations and policy options in Angola. Even though UNITA became inevitably tainted by the support it received from South Africa, Wilson's government was ready to undertake efforts to promote reconciliation between the rival movements, hoping that this would rehabilitate some of the solutions enshrined in the Alvor Agreement and prevent complete MPLA ascendancy in Luanda. This occurred as the Labour government was facing mounting pressure from the Tory opposition, whose new leader, Margaret Thatcher, was displaying a more hawkish attitude towards the Soviet and Cuban interventions in Angola. To this must also be added Britain's eagerness to align its policy with that of the Americans, in keeping with the traditional primacy enjoyed by the 'special relationship' in virtually all matters related to the more strategic dimensions of its foreign policy.[54] The Ford administration's willingness to employ all means at its disposal to prevent an MPLA victory in Angola—basically, covert funds that could be channelled without the approval of an ill-disposed Congress—was well-known in Whitehall and some cooperation was certainly carried out between the two allies in the fields of intelligence and special operations.[55]

By the end of January 1976, notwithstanding Britain's preference for a power-sharing agreement in Angola, a significant amount of thinking in Whitehall had

[53]Concerning this stage of the conflict, see the works listed in note 35, as well as Piero GLEIJESES, *Conflicting Missions*. *Havana, Washington and Africa 1959-1976*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Caroline Press, 2002.

[54] Wilson's government was particularly sensitive on this point. See the appraisal by Ann LANE, 'Foreign and Defense Policy', in Kevin HICKSON & Anthony SELDON (eds.), *New Labour, Old Labour. The Wilson and Callaghan Governments, 1974-1979*, London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 154-17.

[55] On the covert programs which were carried out by the US in Angola during the civil war, see John STOCKWELL, *In Search of Enemies. A CIA Story,* New York : Norton, 1978, and Tiago MOREIRA DE SÁ, *Os Estados Unidos e a Descolonização de Angola*, Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 2011. A very sketchy reference to European covert operations in Angola at this juncture is made in Chester A. CROCKER, *High Noon in Southern Africa: Making Peace in a Rough Neighbourhood*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1992, pp. 48-49.

already been devoted to anticipating the consequences of an MPLA-dominated Angola. A CSAD paper, dated 19 December, pointed out that a quick Neto victory might render him less subservient towards Moscow: a prolonged conflict would therefore be not only pointless but also counter-productive (the real extent of Fidel Castro's support to the MPLA had not been fully grasped by the British at that moment). South Africa's intervention, and the strong suspicions that Pretoria might have received a 'green light' from Washington, undoubtedly made the situation more delicate for the West's interests in Angola, but according to British officials not everything was lost: 'The MPLA will be less well disposed to reduce their dependence on the Soviet Union and less able to resist Soviet demands for their quid pro quo. But there are nevertheless indications that, even now, the MPLA are anxious to reduce their dependence on the Soviet Union'.[56] According to the same paper, there were several things that the United Kingdom could do to obtain such an outcome: it could use its diplomatic clout to press for the departure of all foreign troops from Angola; it could continue its efforts to ensure the formation of 'a broadly based government including at least UNITA' in Angola; and, if the latter objective was not attainable, it could at least do its best to prevent its Western partners from alienating the MPLA, 'and look for ways of developing contact with and influence on the MPLA'. The small committee chaired by Ennals that reviewed the Angolan situation in late December considered that the paper underestimated the dependence of Agostinho Neto towards the USSR but endorsed the main thrust of the CSAD argument.[57]

In the following weeks, these were the fundamental guidelines that underpinned the United Kingdom's policy towards the conflict in Angola. While it tried to impress upon the Cuban, Soviet and South African authorities the importance of an evacuation of their military personnel from Angola,[58] the Wilson government hoped to establish informal contact with the MPLA through various entities, such as the *Casa de Angola*, in Lisbon—an unsuccessful attempt, however. With its consulate in Luanda closed since the previous summer, and no official contacts before 1974,[59] the British authorities were deprived of reliable channels to communicate with the leadership of the MPLA after its proclamation of independence in November 1975—a fact that would complicate matters considerably after London later agreed to recognise Neto's government.

To make matters worse, in January, the British press was awash with reports concerning the departure to Angola of dozens of mercenaries recruited in the United Kingdom by a private firm, Security Advisory Service, allegedly using funds provided by the CIA and Zaire. Although recruited in modest numbers and

[56] TNA, FCO 15/1688, Paper: 'Angola', from the Central and Southern Africa Department, 19 December 1975.
[57] TNA, FCO 15/1688, Summary Record of the Conclusions of Mr. Ennals' Meeting, 19 December 1975.
[58] TNA, FCO 45/1685, Telegrams by James Callaghan to Washington, 22 December, and Havana, 23 December 1975.
[59] Contacts between the Labour Party and allied organizations, such as the Anti-Apartheid Movement, and the MPLA appear to have been much less significant than the ones established with FRELIMO, or even the PAIGC.

displaying combat behaviour that oscillated between the amateurish and the criminal, these 'dogs of war' proved to be a major source of irritation in future relations between London and Luanda. A number of them were made prisoners by the FAPLA (Popular Armed Forces of the Liberation of Angola) and Cubans in the North of Angola and were later put on trial for their 'war crimes' in an *ad hoc* 'revolutionary court' set up in Luanda. In March 1976, four of them were sentenced to the death penalty, and others got long prison sentences. A plea of mercy from Queen Elizabeth II was ignored and those filling the Luanda prisons were exhibited by the Angolan authorities as an example of what would happen to anyone who engaged in conspiracies to overthrow the new regime.[60]

Even though until the end of January 1976 the US administration, and Henry Kissinger in particular, still hoped that extra covert military assistance to UNITA[61] might secure a more satisfactory stalemate in Angola,[62] the British government began to act upon the assumption that an Angola dominated by the MPLA, or at least with prominent MPLA representation in any future government, was virtually inevitable. Not only was the situation on the ground becoming increasingly favourable to the FAPLA and the Cubans after their decisive victories in Quifangongo and Ambriz, but the opinion of the majority of the OAU members was now tilting towards the MPLA in an apparently irresistible manner, thanks to the notoriety achieved by South Africa's intervention. A certain degree of Soviet ascendency in Angola had to be accepted—this was the realistic assessment made by several officials in London. The Western powers, the United Kingdom included, had for years neglected the aspirations of Angolan nationalists, whereas the USSR, notwithstanding some ups and downs, had cultivated a fifteen-year relationship with Neto's movement.[63] The only sensible option for the West, therefore, was to make the best out of a very delicate situation. The fact that several African countries were uncomfortable with the idea of a large Soviet and Cuban presence in Angola was a circumstance that could be exploited by the West in order to mitigate Moscow's influence in Luanda. The critical element, as stressed in several Foreign and Commonwealth Office or Joint Intelligence Committee assessment papers, was South Africa's presence in Angola. As long as Pretoria's contingents remained in the former Portuguese colony, it would be extremely difficult to persuade the MPLA leadership and the more moderate African nations to press for a withdrawal of Cubans troops and Soviet military advisors. Still, it was thought that, similarly to what had happened in other countries, the Angolan regime would try to establish clear water between itself and its main backers. As stated in a report by the Joint Intelligence Committee:

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[60] There are a significant number of FCO files at the National Archives for the years of 1976 and 1977 that provide a considerable amount of information on this affair. Various accounts, of disputable objectivity, also provide interesting insights. See, for instance, Wilfred BURCHET & Derek ROEBUCK, *The Whores of War. Mercenaries Today*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977, and Chris DEMPSTER & David TOMKINS, *Fire Power,* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980.

[61] The FNLA had ceased to be a relevant player since the fall of its strongholds in the North in the early days of January, and was soon deserted by Mobutu and the Americans.

[62] TNA, FCO 45/1884, Brief 'Angola' by A. H. Campbell, 26 January 1976.

[63] TNA, FCO 45/1882, See James Callaghan's telegrams to Washington, 9 January 1976, and the UK Mission to NATO, 13 January 1976.

> *Newly independent countries have shown little gratitude to their previous sponsors and they tend to develop strong, sometimes extreme, nationalistic tendencies. Having rid themselves of their formal imperial master, they appear determined to avoid coming under new domination. It is noticeable that even the puniest of independent African states feels no compunction in rebuffing on occasion a super-power, whether the United States or the Soviet Union. There is no reason to expect the MPLA to react differently; they are regarded by some other African states as exceptionally nationalistic and intransigent.*[64]

The pragmatic appraisal of several officials in Whitehall, largely shared by James Callaghan, was vindicated in the following months. For one thing, the conditions for effective US support to UNITA were starting to crumble as a consequence of the Clark Amendment approved by Congress in late December and signed by President Ford in January. Such an ominous development was not lost on South Africa's Prime minister, John Vorster, who decided to retreat from Angola on 14 January—an evacuation that was completed in late March 1976 when the last South African troops crossed the border into Namibia. Secondly, by mid-February African diplomatic recognition of the MPLA regime (including from countries that had previously been opposed to that action, such as Zambia or Kenya) had reached a point of no return, despite the efforts undertaken by Kissinger to frustrate such an outcome. With Luanda's government now in control of approximately two thirds of the territory, including the whole length of the Benguela Railway, Britain's standard criteria to recognize a new regime were fulfilled. Even though the Tory opposition was reluctant to accept any concessions to the MPLA while the Cubans remained on Angola's soil, Wilson's government was by now able to justify the recognition of Neto's regime through the need to adopt a common position with its EEC partners, the majority of which were similarly inclined. On 18 February, the United Kingdom's recognition of the 'People's Republic of Angola' and the government in Luanda was announced. In the House of Commons, Callaghan refuted the objections made by Tory backbenchers by arguing that 'recognition' was not synonymous with 'approval' and claimed that Britain's aim was to initiate a relationship with Angola based on goodwill and cooperation.[65] In Whitehall, the possibility of offering 'technical assistance' and a 'capital grant' to Angola was already being discussed.[66]

Unfortunately for the British authorities, the establishment of such a friendly relationship would prove exceedingly difficult. Not only did incidents such as the mercenaries' trial and execution poison the dialogue between Luanda and London, but the MPLA government was apparently determined to make the United Kingdom pay a price for the preference it had showed towards UNITA until a relatively late stage of the conflict. Although the British government played a minor role in facilitating the withdrawal of the last South African troops,[67] this was not sufficient to earn the gratitude of the MPLA. According to its priorities, Luanda would give

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[64] TNA, CAB 190/100, Paper 'The Soviet Union and the MPLA: likely future relationship', Joint Intelligence Committee, 26 January 1976.
[65] *The Times*, 'Recognition of Angola: MPLA fulfill criteria', 19 February 1976.
[66] TNA, FCO 45/1884, Brief 'Angola', H. M. S Reid, 3 February 1976.
[67] TNA, FCO 45/1886, Excerpt from Cabinet minute, 24 March 1976.

preference to the opening of foreign embassies and consulates to 'countries that showed sympathy with their struggle for independence', followed by 'countries that did not directly or indirectly support attacks on Angolan territory'[68]. It soon became clear that the MPLA regime did not include the United Kingdom in either of these categories. In practical terms, this meant that the two countries would only reach an agreement for the opening of a British embassy in Luanda in 1978.

With the first phase of the civil war in Angola approaching its end (by mid-March nearly all significant military confrontations had ceased and the SADF contingents were on their way home), it became time to draw up a balance sheet and think about the immediate future. This task was carried out in the first half of 1976 by several departments and officials at the FCO. By the end of February, shortly after the recognition of the MPLA government, the head of the CSAD was forced to admit that the Soviets had clearly gained the upper hand in Angola and would be tempted to repeat their success elsewhere in the continent, 'provided they can [...] represent themselves as making common cause with black Africa in a crusade against white minority rule in Southern Africa'. The most likely scenarios for the next Soviet (and Cuban) intervention would be Namibia, Rhodesia, Zaire and Zambia—the second posing enormous problems for the United Kingdom given its legal responsibilities and direct involvement in the search for a political compromise between the white minority and local African nationalists. Should the Russians and Cubans embark on new adventures, the West's stance had to be absolutely firm: 'Our response [...] should be to make urgent efforts to contain the Russians and Cubans in Angola itself, to deny them opportunities to intervene elsewhere in the region and, when circumstances permit, to mobilise African and international pressure to force their withdrawal.'[69]

The post-mortem on the Angolan morass was eventually carried out by the FCO's Research Department in May 1976. Relying on its own sources, as well as incorporating comments and contributions from various missions and departments, the paper tried to make sense of the timing, motives and objectives of the major foreign interventions in Angola, with the exception of that of South Africa. It concluded, although in a hypothetical vein, that Soviet involvement had essentially been driven by a mixture of opportunism ('to probe the parameters of détente', in order to gain a strategic bridgehead in Africa) and ideological rectitude (solidarity with Third World 'anti-imperialist' movements), while the Cubans, whose record of supporting liberation struggles in Africa was already considerable, accepted their role as surrogates of the USSR to avoid upsetting the global balance of East-West détente. For their part, the Americans were deemed to have been too absorbed by other problems—CSCE and SALT negotiations, the crisis in the Middle East, etc.—to acquire early awareness of what was at stake in Angola, and afterwards became limited by the negative impact of South Africa's intervention. The paper was willing to concede that the United Kingdom had shown a certain 'slowness' in reacting to

[68] TNA, FCO 45/1885, Brief 'Angola: Diplomatic Relations', H. M. S. Reid, 26 December 1976.
[69] TNA, FCO 45/1885, Paper 'The immediate outlook in Central and Southern Africa', 20 February 1976.

events but—in a fit of self-indulgence—such a failure was perceived as a consequence of the effectiveness of Soviet and Cuban 'concealment':

> *It can be said on the basis of this limited inquiry that, when developments in Angola became known to us, appropriate adjustments—vis-à-vis Cuba, the Soviet Union, and the countries of Southern Africa—were made promptly and empirically. [...] The important question therefore is whether we could have obtained earlier information and displayed longer anticipation. The Russians and the Cubans conceal their hands very competently and the West clearly needs better sources of information on Cuba. Few general or adequate conclusions about Soviet and Cuban intentions were drawn from the concatenation of events around Angola.*[70]

Concluding remarks

The United Kingdom's record concerning Portugal's decolonization in Southern Africa was a mixed one. Mozambique's independence was a successful episode for British diplomacy. First, the fact that FRELIMO was the only liberation movement recognized by various international bodies ruled out any hesitation concerning the choice of the 'proper' interlocutor in the period prior to the independence agreement. Secondly, the friendly relationship which existed between FRELIMO's leadership and several prominent figures from Labour's more progressive wing, some of them occupying junior ministerial positions at the FCO in 1974-75, proved to be an extremely fortunate coincidence, which was skilfully exploited by the government. Thirdly, the quality and accuracy of the consular reports sent from Lourenço Marques/Maputo should also be noted. The British representative there, a seasoned diplomat with several years of experience in Portugal and Mozambique, was able to grasp very quickly the fundamental factors of the political situation in the territory, the most salient of them being the capacity displayed by FRELIMO to neutralise all potential rivals and secure an almost unassailable position in the first critical weeks after the Lisbon coup. Duncan was also shrewd in his analysis of the political and ideological dimensions of FRELIMO, even if he overestimated the 'realism' of its leadership—after 1977 they would prove highly susceptible to the promises of a 'modernizing' approach which was closer to the precepts of orthodox Marxism-Leninism than to Julius Nyerere's *Ujamaa*. Still, his notion that Machel would try to balance foreign influences in Mozambique and avoid committing his foreign policy to one of the main Communist powers, the Soviet Union or China, was largely vindicated by events. The United Kingdom would also benefit from Machel's alignment with the sanctions policy against Southern Rhodesia, as well as from his moderating influence over Robert Mugabe, whom he was able to persuade to take part in the Lancaster House negotiations of 1979, and accept the need to make certain concessions to the Rhodesian white farmers. Throughout Mozambique's civil war between FRELIMO and RENAMO (1976-1992), the United Kingdom continued to cultivate a close relationship with Maputo's regime—which would be symbolically

[70] TNA, FCO 51/425, Paper 'Angola's Post Mortem: the Soviet Cuban Intervention', Michael Duncan, Research Department, 3 May 1976.

crowned in 1995 with Mozambique's membership of the Commonwealth, a remarkable exception to the "Anglocentric" scope of this organisation.

Relations with Angola evolved in a very different manner. As I have tried to demonstrate, Britain's official 'neutrality' and 'non-intervention' policy had its flaws, particularly in the period immediately after the Alvor agreement, when a bias towards UNITA was noticeable and assistance to Savimbi's movement appears to have been facilitated or encouraged. Inevitably, this would be resented by the MPLA, who emerged in early 1976 from the first phase of Angola's protracted civil war (1974-2002) as the victorious party. In addition to this, the closure of its Consulate in Luanda in the summer of 1975 deprived London of a reliable source of information on the ground and a channel to communicate directly with the MPLA, once its government was recognised in February 1976. The history of the pre-1974 contacts with Agostinho Neto's movement is also a factor to be taken into account: with a predominately Francophone and Lusophone elite, and a much more pronounced pattern of dependence towards Moscow than other Lusophone liberation movements, the MPLA appears to have enjoyed only a modicum of sympathy from the more *engagé* sectors of the Labour Left. More crucially, the Cold War dimensions of Angola's transition to independence weighed heavily in Britain's perceptions and resulting options towards the different players. On the one hand, Kissinger's determination to prevent a Communist take-over in Angola could not be ignored by a Labour administration that was keenly committed to the maintenance of its 'special relationship' with Washington. Even though London did its best to avoid becoming hostage to Kissinger's unrealistic stance, its association with some American initiatives—such as its attempt to persuade European allies and OAU members to defer recognition to Luanda's regime after January 1976—carried a high price in the short and medium term. On the other hand, its efforts to promote reconciliation between the warring parties, to set an example for the other conflicts in Southern Africa and prevent a permanent Soviet and Cuban military encroachment in the region, was also a damaging option in the light of the somewhat 'hubristic' mood that prevailed in Luanda after 1976.

While in Mozambique a fortunate combination of circumstances, a realistic assessment of the situation on the ground and bold policy moves ensured Britain a rewarding diplomatic triumph, in Angola the bitterness of the local power struggles, poor intelligence and the many strategic complexities of the Cold War conspired to make the United Kingdom, along with the United States, one of the net losers of the transition process set in motion by Portugal's end of empire.

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