

THE TORMENT OF ANGOLA

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JUST as 5 January 1959, the date of the Leopoldville riots, and not 30 June 1960, the date of formal declaration, marks the beginning of their independence for the Congolese, so 15 March 1961 may well mark the beginning of independence for Angola. On that day the first popular African uprising against Portuguese hegemony in recent times took place. Its outcome is still in the balance; but whatever the immediate results, there can be no doubt that this is a turning point. Things will never be the same again.

In the history of peoples, the forlorn hope has often served as a fuse for the finally successful revolution. The way may be arduous, the odds seem insuperable, but conviction and determination bring their inevitable reward. At such times the innocent on both sides will inevitably suffer, and none can certainly regard with equanimity the horrors of the present struggle in Angola.

It is a major irony that a country which has prided itself on a non-racial policy of 'integration' should have witnessed the most bitter struggle between races in Africa south of the Sahara—so far. Looking across the South Atlantic, towards the Brazilian giant which grew out of the same matrix, one cannot but sorrow over the mediaeval spirit that the last 35 years have brought to Portugal. Had a strenuous endeavour been made to implement the traditional policy of non-racialism, Angola might well by now have presented to the world the most harmonious race relations in Africa, instead of the cruel conflict which has shocked even her closest friends.

In spite of government statements claiming the fullest awareness of what was brewing, the attacks when they came took the settler population of Angola by surprise. Years of propaganda, insisting that it could not happen there, had persuaded them that all was well, that Africans were not the resentful victims of injustice, and that in any event they had no weapons and no leaders. How wrong the propaganda was!

Clandestinely the Union of the Populations of Angola (UPA) had built up its organisation, based on necessity outside the

country. With some naïvety, they made it known that something was going to happen on 15 March; but the authorities refused to take the warning seriously, so that the initial onslaught was a terrifying success. Plantations, commercial centres and isolated government outposts were attacked and destroyed from the Congo frontier down to within a hundred miles of Luanda. At least 500 white and coloured people were killed, many of them with the long pruning knives or matchets used in plantation work. Women and children were not spared. There were mutilations. It was a chilling demonstration of what the release of long pent-up feelings can do.

The natural reaction of the white community was to defend itself. Military forces in the country were weak and widely scattered. The administrative authorities armed the civilian population, and throughout the country bands of vigilantes were formed. Their reprisals against Africans have not been as widely publicised as the atrocities committed by the insurgents, but the authorities have admitted their own difficulty in restraining counter-measures by the civilians. For at least a month the situation was practically anarchic, with the government holding the reins loosely in the hope that passions would work themselves out. In Luanda there was nightly terror in the locations where Africans, many of them educated and responsible citizens, were hauled from their homes and shot. In the interior wholesale arrests and summary shootings have resulted in the panic flight of most of the African population into the hills, ravines and forests, or across the border into the Congo. By the middle of May press reports widely quoted an estimate of 20,000 for the number of Africans killed in retaliation and repression.

With the approach of the dry season—which extends from May to October—the government has announced its plan for a ruthless campaign “to exterminate the terrorists,” first by burning the eight foot high bush grass, and then by bombing and strafing the forests in which the insurgents will be compelled to take refuge. This scorched earth policy is bound to be indiscriminate. With universal panic, women and children, the aged and the infirm, have uniformly fled from their villages, many of which have been burned or bombed out of existence. The answer that is commonly given to those who appeal against such a proposal is: “They started it. We must pay them back in their own coin.”

It is the purpose of this article to examine the truth of such

a statement.

Portugal's relations with Angola began in 1482 when Diego Cao discovered the mouth of the Congo river, landing on the south bank of the estuary, close by S. Antonio do Zaire. Nine years later Roman Catholic priests settled at Sao Salvador, the capital of the ancient Kongo kingdom, where in 1534 there were laid the foundations of the first Christian church in the southern hemisphere. Its ruined chancel still stands, a monument to the faith and courage of those early missionaries. Luanda, the modern capital, was not founded until 1575, and Benguela in 1617. In 1580 Portugal became a vassal of Spain and, in the next 60 years, lost much of her overseas empire. In 1640 she reasserted her independence; but in the following year the Dutch siezed Luanda, holding it until 1648, when Correia de Sa e Benevides recaptured the city with reinforcements brought from Brazil. By this time Portuguese influence at the Kongo court had declined and in 1660 the king revolted against his foreign overlord, only to be defeated in 1666 at the battle of Ambuila. From this time forward the Portuguese concentrated their interest further south, although missionary activity continued at the Kongo capital, Sao Salvador, well into the 18th century.

In 1763 Pombal expelled the Jesuits from Portugal and her dominions, thereby bringing missionary activity practically to an end. Since the spiritual arm was the most venturesome in seeking to penetrate the hinterland, the next hundred years saw little progress towards laying bare the secrets of the continent. Administrative and commercial interests, living mainly by the slave trade, as did other maritime peoples of the day, adhered to the coastal regions and suffered the corrupting influences that all such trading must involve. The journeys of Capelo, Ivens and Serpa Pinto from 1877, courageous and resourceful as they were, were dictated partly at least by political considerations; but they came too late to ensure acceptance for the claim of effective occupation made at the Berlin Conferences.

In the scramble for Africa, Portugal felt herself unjustly treated. She was still left with the two extensive territories of Angola and Moçambique, which she desired to make into one by the acquisition of what is now Southern Rhodesia. A British "ultimatum" to Portugal in January 1890 stopped the Portuguese advance, but the patriotic reaction was such as nearly to bring down the monarchy in the first republican revolt of 1891.

In the 1890's Portugal's financial distress became acute, and it was commonly believed in the chancelleries of Europe that she would have to sell her colonies. In August 1898 Britain and Germany signed a convention, whereby spheres of influence were assigned to the two countries, should Portugal have to contract a loan with her colonies as security. The next decade witnessed increasing political tension between monarchists and republicans, resulting in the regicide of 1908 and the end of the monarchy in 1910. For 16 years Portugal tried democracy; but coming so ill prepared, and in face of steady opposition from the Roman Catholic Church, the country slipped increasingly into bankruptcy. So came the coup of 1926 and the beginning of the present régime. Two years later Salazar entered its government as Minister of Finance. By his financial competence and the most stringent control over public expenditure, he had within five years extinguished the public debt. The world economic crisis prevented any large-scale investment in the overseas territories during the 'thirties, while the Second World War and the Allied blockade of Germany delayed still further the internal development of Angola.

Portugal's neutrality, however, laid the foundations for her economic recovery. Trading agreements were made with both sides, and the leasing of the Azores to the Allies brought a considerable financial reward to Portugal. When the war ended and trade once more flowed freely among the nations, timber, vegetable oils and foodstuffs found a ready market and made the escudo one of the hardest currencies in the world. Principal amongst Angola's exports was coffee, which at one stage provided 60% of Portugal's foreign exchange. The money flowed into Angola, and the territory at last began to attract the investment that its potentialities deserved. The port of Luanda was enlarged and modernised. Hydro-electric schemes provided electric power for Luanda, Lobito and Mossamedes. The road system was improved by the construction of concrete bridges to replace the antiquated ferries and flimsy wooden culverts that had served for the pre-war volume of traffic. The flow of white immigrants increased as news of Angola's wealth was spread in Portugal. In 1940 there were 40,000 settlers; by 1950, 79,000; and by 1960, an estimated 200,000. Africans benefited indirectly from the increased wealth of the country, and directly through improved health services (the anti-sleeping sickness campaign with the new drug pertamidine was a notable

undertaking), and higher prices obtainable for the crops produced by peasant agriculturalists. Some few even acquired wealth through their ownership of coffee plantations.

Why then have the Africans revolted? The official view is provocation from without and Protestant complicity from within. The real reasons are economic, social, political and human.

Economic

Amongst the trading community, there are to be found unscrupulous men whose exactions and dishonesties only serve to awaken resentment in their customers. It was such treatment that led to the Bailundo rising of 1902.

Resentment too had been caused by the expropriation of land, particularly in the coffee-bearing regions of the Dembos (Cuanza-Norte), Carmona and Sao Salvador, all three districts in which the initial onslaught of 15 March was particularly severe. Traditional African rights were not respected, save where regular and consistent cultivation could be proved. All land was, legally, vested in the State, which granted concessions to those who could prove capacity to develop their holdings.

Exceptionally, the government gave direct assistance to colonists, as in the striking and much publicised settlement at Cela between Lobito and Nova Lisboa; but in most instances outright grants of lands were made to immigrants from Portugal. Abuse also crept into the negotiations that preceded the granting of such concessions. Government officials (who by standards in other parts of Africa are very poorly paid) have often behaved with little regard for the 'mission' of Portuguese civilisation. Graft, corruption and deceit, in spite of the valiant efforts of some high-minded administrators, have angered and embittered Africans, whose feelings about the inalienability of land are as strong and ineradicable as Naboth's.

But even more fatal in its impact upon African opinion than commercial trickery or the expropriation of family lands has been the system of "contract" labour, a subtle euphemism for what in other places is called forced labour. Under this system all able-bodied males whose holdings fail to attain certain standards of size, efficiency or productiveness, or who do not hold an artisan's licence, are recruited forcibly for periods of six months at least in any one year, either for public works or for service with private employers. In November 1955, when

Portugal entered the United Nations, there was a momentary relaxation of the obligatory principle; but anxiety over the possible threat to the economy of the country was such that measures were soon enough taken to ensure that the flow of labour should not be impeded by any such aberrations as a free contract. All the same, Portugal's adhesion to the United Nations did mean more rigorous control over the employers of contract labourers. Payment began to be made at central administration offices rather than at district "posts", and a proportion of the men's wages had to be deposited with the administrator before men could be recruited. Medical care was guaranteed, and the issue of clothing, blankets and rations supervised. But the system was understandably hated and, although some habituated themselves to the routine and became "voluntary" workers, the vast majority bitterly resented their loss of personal freedom and the consequent inability to develop their own holdings. Many Africans in the frontier areas crossed into the Congo, and Ovimbundu labourers (Bailundos, as the Portuguese call them) from central Angola were sent to the coffee plantations of the north.

Social

Portugal had prided herself on her non-racial tradition and the policy of assimilation. "This", said the Portuguese, "sets us apart from all other colonisers. We are colour-blind. Look at Brazil. Look at Angola." And until 1953 the Africans, or some of them, may even have believed this. In that year, the legislation governing the assimilation of indigenous populations was codified in a new statute. The status of "assimilado" was abolished, and instead, Africans qualifying for assimilation were, if successful in their application, accorded the status of full citizens. Unfortunately, the statute also provided in its provisions for the withdrawal of citizenship from Africans who might possess it, and in any assessment of recent events this factor clearly has great significance. A European can lose his citizenship *rights*, but he can never lose his citizenship. Such was not the case with Africans. Although Africans continued to make applications for citizenship, doubt had been sown in the back of their minds, and doubt that was nurtured by the obvious reluctance of government officials to assist Africans in gaining the newly offered status. Difficulties seemed constantly to be made over the provision of legal birth certificates and other

essential documents. The scale of remuneration, the standard of housing and the grade of education were persistently questioned. Africans often had recourse to shady lawyers in order to get over these difficulties, and many could have said, as Paul's centurion did: "With a great sum obtained I this citizenship." The requirements for assimilation were heavily loaded in favour of the urban dweller, although for peasant farmers the title of 'agricultor' brought certain privileges which several thousand Africans were glad to obtain in the regions about Carmona and the Dembos. But, by and large, Africans in the last five years have come to regard the policy of assimilation as a sham and a snare.

Without doubt too the extensive immigration of recent years largely contributed towards creating this impression. A growth of at least 100,000 within a decade, apart from natural increase, meant that the European population as a whole lacked much in experience of African life and conditions. The early settlers included many shrewd and hard-working peasants from Madeira and rural Portugal, who by their own efforts had carved out a livelihood for themselves without gratuitously prejudicing African interests. In many places, even as late as 1955, human relationships between the races were by no means unfriendly. After all, the economic and political disabilities endured under the Salazar régime were common to both black and white. But the new wave of immigrants introduced a new spirit into the country. Many came with the object of getting rich quickly, and most wished to stay in the security of the towns. (In Luanda recently I talked with a taxi driver who had only been outside Luanda once in 14 years!) Even the government has had its problems with square settlers who would not fit into the round hole of Cela. There were, of course, exceptions.

At the same time the economic recession of the past few years struck Angola. The price of coffee dropped. The demand for certain farm products diminished. The fishing industry in the South collapsed. And all this took place at a time when an increasing number of Africans were leaving mission and other private schools in search of advancement. Some of these came up against colour prejudice, and the rebuff was disillusioning. Unemployment quickened the spirit of competitiveness. Angola was ripe for development, but the resources were inadequate.

Political

Political considerations were, of course, largely to blame for

this state of affairs. Portuguese are kindly and generous people, but political xenophobes. It is for this reason that they have placed so many restrictions on the entry of foreign capital. They fear the political miasma that hovers over loans and economic aid. Yet in a world hurtling along the road of material progress, Angola cannot expect its people to stand by and wait for the leeway of centuries to be reduced. Both black and white have been infuriated or constantly madly irritated at the slowness in the development of Angola's potential. Everyone's patience has its limit.

There is, too, the more direct political resentment at the continuing iron grip of the régime upon every aspect of daily life. The Portuguese are by nature independent and relaxed. They detest dictatorship and have been uneasy under Salazar's paternalism for many years. Ruthless measures with political opponents gradually crushed resistance to the New State, while Salazar's financial and diplomatic skill brought some of his opponents to a reluctant admiration. But in the past decade resistance has grown ever stronger, and the secret police (PIDE) ever more stringent in its counter-measures. In 1958 the anti-government candidate for the presidency, General Humberto Delgado, polled 20% of the votes in Angola: 40% abstained. The methods adopted by the government to secure the remaining 40% were, to say the least of it, unorthodox. Following this election, the secret police were introduced into Angola and security measures tightened up, so that many Portuguese, who had emigrated to Angola because of the freer air that was to be breathed there, glanced over their shoulders when talking in the cafés, while suspicion and fear mounted.

Coinciding with increased political repression came the beginnings of African liberation from colonial rule, beginning with Ghana in 1957 and reaching the northern border of Angola in June 1960. As early as October 1959 pamphlets were stuck on buildings in towns and villages throughout the northern border country, demanding independence for Angola in 1960. A forlorn hope? At that time Congo independence looked at least 5 years away. It came in 9 months. Small wonder, therefore, if Angola's Africans refused to admit that independence for them was on some far-off, invisible horizon.

Human

There remains a final and compelling reason why Angola

has burst into flames: the decisive failure in humanity. The Portuguese are affectionate, home-loving and hospitable, but they can also be harsh and inhuman. And these flaws in character have left a bitter legacy behind. Nevinson's *'A Modern Slavery'* shocked an earlier generation by its story of callousness and cruelty. Although liberalism during the early days of the republic softened the harshness, the return of despotism has meant an exaltation of power that has stultified the law by turning every man into the absolute arbiter of his own actions. Beatings with the 'palmatorio', arbitrary imprisonment, the use of informers and *agents provocateurs*, the arrest of wives as hostages, collective punishments, and above all the contempt—here is the failure in humanity, so explicitly stated a few weeks ago by the new Minister of Defence, when bidding farewell to soldiers embarking for Angola: "You are not going to fight against human beings, but against savages and wild beasts."

Assimilation? Can Africans be blamed if they reject it?

The General Assembly of the United Nations has refused to accept Portugal's plea that Angola and other overseas possessions are *not* "non-self-governing territories" (December 1960). It has now agreed to the appointment of a five-man commission of enquiry into the situation in Angola (April 1961). National pride and fear of the economic consequences to follow any loss of her overseas possessions have inhibited Portugal so far from giving a rational audience to these resolutions. Her moderate men must realise, however, that they cannot insulate their country from the movements and ideologies that are sweeping the world. The Nigerian delegate spoke in statesmanlike terms at the April debate in New York when he said: "If Portugal were to take the necessary steps to rectify conditions and if they were to work towards progress and development, I am sure they would have the goodwill of the people of Angola. The African states are not bitter. They are quite prepared to be realistic about matters. They know there are problems to be solved. All we request of Portugal and the United Nations is that certain steps be taken now in order to enable the people of Angola to work towards their self-determination."