



Portugal's War in Angola

W.A. van der Waals

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On 4 February 1961, the day regarded by the MPLA as the start of its national revolution, the storm broke. Taken unawares by the shock of the uprisings in Angola, and the subsequent bloody Bacongo insurrection on 15 March 1961, Portugal was to plunge its armed forces, untested since World War I, into an urgent counteroffensive. In January 1961, Angola, one of Portugal's most thriving 'overseas provinces' was in the eye of a storm. A period of sustained growth in the 1950s, a golden decade of Portuguese African history, had led to Angola becoming one of Portugal's most prized possessions. National development plans were embarked on with zeal; new roads, railways, factories, harbors, airfields and settlements were built and exports increased dramatically. While the rest of Africa was in turmoil, Angola and Portuguese Mozambique seemed like oases of peace and progress. Couched between its high-sounding principles and its policy of Luso-Tropicalism, Portugal marched ever onwards to the beat of its own drum, seemingly oblivious to its impending fate. Portuguese Prime Minister, Dr. Salazar, had ruled over Portugal's colonies with an iron fist for over thirty years, enforcing a draconian racial policy on the African territories, whereby the population of the New State was categorized into 'native', white and 'assimilated' groups, and the colonies as a whole, with their burgeoning economies, were bound to the dictates of the European state. The Angolan war has been described as the bloodiest colonial insurgency in the history of Africa south of the Sahara. But it was to become a conflict that Portugal would lose not on the battlefield, but in the hearts of its own citizens. After a thirteen-year war of attrition in Angola, and facing increasing setbacks in two of its other war-torn territories, an enervated Portugal with its weary armed forces would deal the final blow to itself.

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