

# Two South Africans in the Portuguese Wars of Decolonization (1961-1975): it could have been better, it could have been worse.

Bruno Cardoso Reis<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The two books reviewed in this article offer testimonies by two South Africans with direct experience of the Portuguese Wars of Decolonization. Al Venter is the only foreign war correspondent with direct experience in the field in all three theaters of operations of the Portuguese late colonial wars. Brigadier General van der Waals was the Vice-Consul and *de facto* military attaché in Luanda from 1970 to 1974. Both books show that South Africa was the foreign power most directly involved in these conflicts and with most vital interests at stake. It has, consequently, every reason to pay the closest possible attention to them. Both books also show that, despite the close cooperation in the field between South Africa and Portugal, especially after 1968, the mainstream South African view of these counter-insurgencies was often very critical of the Portuguese war effort.

## Keywords

South Africa, Portugal, counter-insurgency, Angola, Mozambique

## Resumo

Os dois livros analisados neste artigo oferecem testemunhos escritos por dois sul-africanos com experiência directa das guerras portuguesas de descolonização de 1961-1975. O texto de Al Venter representa o testemunho do único correspondente de guerra estrangeira com experiência directa no terreno dos três teatros de operações das guerras coloniais portuguesas. O outro é da autoria do general de brigada van der Waals, vice-cônsul e adido militar *de facto* da África do Sul em Luanda no período 1970-1974. Ambos os livros são reveladores do facto de que a África do Sul foi a potência estrangeira com a maior participação directa e mais interesses vitais em jogo nestes conflitos e tinha, consequentemente, todas as razões para lhes prestar a máxima atenção. Ambos os livros também mostram que, apesar da estreita cooperação no terreno entre África do Sul e Portugal, especialmente depois de 1968, o ponto de vista dominante entre os sul-africanos relativamente a estas guerras de contra-guerrilha foi muitas vezes muito crítico do esforço de guerra português.

## Palavras-chave

África do Sul, Portugal, contra-insurreição, Angola, Moçambique

---

<sup>1</sup> ICS - University of Lisbon. E-mail: [bcreis37@gmail.com](mailto:bcreis37@gmail.com)

Al J. Venter, *Portugal e as Guerrilhas de África - As guerras portuguesas em Angola, Moçambique e Guiné Portuguesa, 1961-1974*. Lisbon: Clube do Autor, 2015.

Willem S. van der Waals, *Guerra e Paz: Portugal/ Angola, 1961-1974*. Lisbon: Casa das Letras, 2015.

The two books reviewed in this article offer testimonies by two South Africans with direct experience of the Portuguese Wars of Decolonization. Al J. Venter is a war correspondent, born in 1938, with decades of experience covering conflicts across Africa and beyond. Venter claims to be the only (foreign?) war correspondent with direct experience in the field of all three theaters of operations of the Portuguese late colonial wars: Angola (1961-1975), Guinea-Bissau (1963-1974) and Mozambique (1964-1974). He penned the almost six hundred-page-long *Portugal e as Guerrilhas de África* covering these three late colonial counter-insurgencies. Brigadier General Willem S. van der Waals is a military officer with decades of personal involvement with Angola both before and after independence. More specifically, van der Waals was Vice-Consul and *de facto* military attaché at the South African Consulate in Luanda from 1970 to 1974. Van der Waals' book *Guerra e Paz: Portugal/ Angola, 1961-1974* is based on his official reports from Luanda and access to other documents in the South African military archives, even if unfortunately these are not quoted or properly referenced. Both authors are therefore part of a small group of South Africans with deep knowledge of the former Portuguese colonies who were influential in shaping the way these wars were perceived in South Africa. Not surprisingly both authors have known each other for decades, and, in fact Al Venter's Ashanti Press published the first edition of van der Waals' book in English in 1993 with the title *Portugal's War in Angola 1961-1974*. The authors also make references to, and use, each other's material – namely photos – in their respective books, and therefore, not surprisingly, they provide a broadly similar picture of these wars, albeit with some differences in their approaches and writing styles. Regardless of the specificities, both books show that South Africa was the foreign power with the most direct involvement and the most vital interests at stake in these conflicts and had every reason to pay the closest possible attention to them. Both books also show, perhaps to the surprise of some, that, despite the close cooperation in the field between South Africa and Portugal, especially after 1968, the mainstream South African view of these counter-insurgencies was often very critical of the

Portuguese war effort. They also reveal significant gaps in their knowledge both about metropolitan Portugal and its colonial history.

The two books are at their strongest when providing a record of their author's direct experiences of the Portuguese counter-insurgency campaign in Angola, and also, in the case of al Venter, of the campaigns in Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique. Unfortunately, van der Waals, in particular, opted to include a very long introduction explaining the context of the conflicts. This might be justified in the original version of these books, given the limited knowledge of English-language readers about the context of these late colonial conflicts, as well as about Portuguese colonial history in Africa, but, in the Portuguese translations reviewed here, the introduction should have been significantly shortened. It takes van der Waals one hundred pages to reach the year 1961 when the first late colonial insurgency started in Angola. This means that those looking for a specific section on the role of South Africa in the war in Angola in van der Waal's book will have to wade through many pages before they get even the first limited piece of information on this subject (van der Waals, pp. 237-238; pp. 342-354), when they are informed that intelligence cooperation *in loco* started in 1963, and that the broader cooperation only intensified, from 1966 onwards, after the first infiltration of SWAPO nationalist insurgents from Zambia into South African-controlled Namibia, via the South of Angola.

Furthermore, the introductory pages about Portuguese colonial history are largely based upon outdated publications. This leads to a number of mistakes or, at the very least, rather questionable statements. For instance, and to start in a period of some relevance for these late colonial counter-insurgencies, van der Waals follows the old (and now largely discredited) official line that the MPLA was founded in 1956 (p. 107). Van der Waals also makes reference to Portugal *becoming* a member of NATO as a positive factor in the course of the campaigns, but, if this is not a mistranslation, then it is a mistake. Portugal was a founding member of NATO back in 1949, well before 1961. And, more to the point, NATO solidarity was limited and certainly did not extend to the continued provision of significant military equipment for these conflicts overseas, or, in NATO-parlance "out-of-area". Van der Waals does, in fact, then point out that only France really provided vital equipment to Portugal without any caveats, not least helicopters, which are vital in a counterinsurgency campaign. But this is not because, as van der Waals (p. 241) puts it, "Portugal becoming a member of NATO made the guarantee of military support viable." Instead, it happened in spite of this, and because of de Gaulle's pursuit of a more autonomous foreign policy, which led him out of NATO military command structure and

led to a rapprochement with Portugal. But perhaps this misperception by van der Waals should be seen primarily as revealing of the extent to which *apartheid* South African elites felt isolated internationally, even relative to Portugal.

Still, the real difficulty in obtaining supplies of vital equipment for Portuguese campaigns overseas from most of the country's NATO allies, despite attempts to do so as far back as 1957, was in fact a major reason why South African support became increasingly indispensable, and impossible to resist, despite Salazar's traditional reservations regarding Pretoria's hegemonic intentions in Southern Africa.

Regarding the official Portuguese counter-insurgency guidelines, van der Waals rightly points to the strong influence of French counter-insurgency doctrine. But this was not, as van der Waals claims (pp. 203-04), due to a very large number of Portuguese officers participating in French operations in Algeria – something that France would not allow and Portugal could not afford. Small missions of Portuguese officers were sent to Algeria (and to the *École de Guerre* in Paris) in the short period between 1959-1961 to learn, emulate, and adapt French counter-insurgency doctrine. The key point is that this was not simply a way for the many to carry out scattered *in loco* observations, but a deliberate doctrinal emulation and development on the part of a few, very influential, Portuguese officers.

Al Venter's book is more up-to-date in terms of these more generic or contextual references, but it is still not error-free in terms of the wider context of the war, or above resorting to Wikipedia as a reference (p. 95). It is difficult, for instance, to give credit to Venter's claim (p. 96) that, because as he puts it black Africans fought alongside whites after the initial shock of the bloody 1961 Angolan uprising, this resulted in racial prejudice being rapidly put aside. But again the relatively multi-racial nature of the Portuguese troops, even of its officers, was something that definitely caused an impression in Apartheid era South African, and is a point to which these authors make frequent reference. But the lack of rigid or legalized racism in the Portuguese colonies, in contrast to South Africa, does not mean that it did not exist. After all, even South Africa eventually used black troops recruited in Angola.

Venter's book suffers from not being clearly structured in a conventional sense, as illustrated by the fact that what would seem to be the logical concluding chapter of this volume on "Why Portugal lost the wars in Africa" appears in the middle of the book (pp. 216 ff.).

Al Venter's book is a rewarding read even when he seems to get some things wrong. And this is not just simply a matter of his captivating journalistic style. For instance, Al Venter (pp. 236-238) quotes from, and concurs with, van der Waals' book about the origins of the military coup in Portugal on April 25, 1974. Both van der Waals and Al Venter echo rumors heard in Luanda, including those allegedly spread by the Commander-in-Chief replaced by General Costa Gomes, in 1968, that the latter was secretly a Communist, as "proven" by his involvement in the 1961 attempt to force Salazar out of power. And that Marcelo Caetano –Salazar's replacement as head of government in 1968 – was a dangerous Portuguese de Gaulle ready to give up the colonies. Last but not least, these sources that they quote also claimed that the coup of the 25 April 1974 had been in the making since 1972. What is the problem with these views? No credible sources show the existence of a network of disgruntled young officers before late 1973. And, while the involvement of Costa Gomes in the failed *pronunciamento* led by the Defense Minister General Botelho Moniz in April, 1961, is not open to question, this had nothing to do with a Communist conspiracy. Instead, it involved almost all the top Portuguese military leaders that had been loyal to the regime for decades. And this thesis begs the question why would Costa Gomes go on to basically win the war in Angola (insofar as you can win against an insurgency with cross-border support), a point about which these often skeptical South Africans have no doubts. Still, it is impossible to disagree that General Costa Gomes was an enigmatic figure. And even if these views about the remote Communist origins and long-term planning of the April 1974 military coup are probably wrong, and in any event almost impossible to prove, they are still highly revealing of the kind of tensions, linked with the conduct and the end-game of these late colonial wars in Africa, which were emerging within senior Portuguese military and political elites, years before the 1974 coup brought them spectacularly into the open. In fact, this growing division at the very top of the Portuguese civil and military elite is a powerful explanation of the April 1974 military coup that brought an abrupt end to almost half a century of the authoritarian regime of the *Estado Novo* and more than a decade of counter-insurgency campaigns designed to stop the decolonization of Portuguese Africa.

Venter (pp. 240-41) also goes back to the old idea that Portuguese officers were poorly paid and tries to provide data to this effect, even comparing their salaries with those of British and French officers, who apparently earned twice as much in a similar post. But this kind of comparison seems to ignore the significant subsidies that Portuguese officers posted overseas and operating in war zones received. More

importantly, it ignores the very low average Portuguese wage, as well as the difference in the cost of living between a country like Britain or France and Portugal. The first official Portuguese minimum wage came with the revolutionary labor legislation enacted after the military coup of April 1974, and no one disputes that it represented a significant increase relative to the average wage until then. This new minimum wage was 3,300 escudos. In 1974, a captain was earning 10,400 escudos. Portuguese officers were not poorly paid, given the country they were living in, and certainly not in comparison with the majority of the population earning close to the minimum wage. Still, Portuguese officers, evidently and perhaps understandably, felt that putting their lives on the line deserved better salaries – and seem to have made clear their discontent to Venter. This recurrent complaint clearly reflects a very real and significant undercurrent of dissatisfaction. The key problem with making this the main trigger of the military coup of April 1974 is that this seems to have been a recurrent complaint of professional (and conscripted) officers for a long time. Not only was it not something new, but military officers had been given a pay raise by Caetano in 1974 in a desperate attempt to address the inflation resulting from the post-1973 oil crisis and to try to calm corporate complaints that he feared (correctly as it turned out) might become politicized. But this pay raise gave the junior and middle-ranking officers more deeply involved in the conspiracy to overthrow the regime an additional argument to convince waverers, by pointing to this belated increase in their salary as a dishonorable attempt to bribe them.

The key trigger of the 1974 coup seems to have been much more what many professionals perceived as a challenge to their *esprit de corps* and their career prospects in the form of an understandable, if inept, attempt by the Caetano government to turn conscript officers into professionals in order to address the growing shortage of professional junior officers needed to carry on the war and lead the large numbers of conscripts without a loss in military effectiveness. As noted by the authors, less than half of the places in the Military Academy were being filled by 1973. A recurrent, indeed key theme in both books is the erosion of the professional cadre of officers who found themselves on repeated tours of duty in these campaigns year after year, and the very real problems created in terms of training and leadership that this shortage of sufficient professional officers created for the effective conduct of a counter-insurgency campaign that is always greatly dependent upon the quality of junior and mid-level officers.

The greatest strengths of Al Venter's book are his reportages undertaken in the company of Portuguese troops, resulting in a rich sample of testimonies, not least from

South African and Rhodesian military officers who were also present in the field and often very critical of the Portuguese war effort. As a classic example of war reportage, Venter's book gives us an idea of what the war actually felt like in the field from the Portuguese side, including the troops' living conditions. Namely Venter (pp. 36-38) points pertinently to the massive and largely successful effort required for creating logistical lines across many thousands of kilometers, and their vital importance in maintaining morale through the regular supply of mail and food.

Venter (pp. 114 ff.) then goes on to offer his readers some vivid portraits of people involved in the conflict. This is the case with the conscript Captain Alçada in Angola, a lawyer and a former student of Marcelo Caetano in his time as a law professor, so committed to the grandiose vision of the Greater Portugal overseas that he volunteered for a second tour of duty in Angola, leading a company of commandos. According to Venter, Alçada believed that the solution to these conflicts was to be as ruthless as the adversary, namely making prisoners an offer they could not refuse – change sides or die. Or, as he put it to Venter, 'the secret was in getting your hands dirty' (pp. 123-26). For those who might think that these books written by white South Africans are blindly apologetic of the Portuguese wars in Africa, it will come as a shock to find not only that they are sometimes critical of Portuguese military effectiveness, but that they are also very blunt about what they saw as frequent torture of prisoners by PIDE, but also complaints about abuses by the Portuguese military against the civilian population – especially in the case of Mozambique, namely with populations resisting resettlement being killed and reported as insurgents despite the absence of guns. This testimony is all the more relevant because they do not show any particular hostility towards some of these torturers, such as the converted insurgent Alfredo or the PIDE Agent Óscar Cardoso, whom they portray as very effective, so there is little reason to question the veracity of their testimony (Venter, p. 167, *passim*).

A fascinating cameo painted by Venter (pp. 247 ff.) is that of Captain Bacar, who led a company of locally recruited commandos in Guinea-Bissau. Bacar was one of the many Fula Muslims recruited by the Portuguese military, but he clearly stood out. Bacar was awarded the highest Portuguese decoration for outstanding leadership and bravery in combat, and literally became the stuff of legend. And whether or not all his exploits were true, this episode is revealing of the perceptions that existed in the field, and does make a great read. Bacar's death a week after Venter had been allocated to join his company also makes it clear that, in real wars, even heroes die because of simple mistakes or sheer bad luck – in Bacar's case he apparently slipped in the swampy terrain so typical of Guinea-

Bissau while throwing a short-fuse grenade in response to an ambush, and then opted to cover it with his body at the very last second to save his men.

The most important conclusion that we can draw from both these books is that these South African observers, while not ideologically prejudiced against the Portuguese wars in Africa (in fact, quite the opposite), were, however, often very critical of what they saw in the field. This is especially true in the case of the war in Mozambique, ironically conducted by the most right-wing Portuguese Commander-in-Chief, Kaulza de Arriaga. But Mozambique was, of course, the closest and potentially most threatening campaign to the territorial heartland of South Africa (and Rhodesia), and consequently the one most closely watched by the South Africans. And increasingly these South Africans did not like what they saw from the late 1960s onwards, in contrast with the case of Angola, where they tended to make a positive evaluation of General Costa Gomes and his deputy in the new frontline in the East of the country, General Bettencourt Rodrigues. Perhaps the most scathing criticism of Portuguese counter-insurgency in Mozambique came from the former commander of the Malayan SAS and Rhodesian Selous Scouts, Colonel Ron Reid-Daily (Venter, pp. 420 ff.) He believed that Portuguese troops in Mozambique were incapable of maintaining the tactical discipline needed for effective ambushes or long-range raids. They also lacked basic bush skills. Reid-Daily saw this partly as a lack of adequate training and partly as a lack of sufficient numbers of professional officers providing good leadership. All this was reflected, according to Reid-Daily, in an approach to the war based on minimizing risks to the point of actively avoiding contact with the enemy. Venter echoes this criticism, but points in their defense to their lack of experience of the region – something that came naturally to many Rhodesian or South African soldiers born and raised in rural Africa – as well as to their lack of adequate equipment for greater mobility or effective long-term raids. In short, Rhodesian and South African officers wanted the Portuguese conscripts to perform in these wars in a way that they were not trained or equipped to do. Van der Waals, moreover, does point out that, in Portuguese doctrine—with strong French influences – they were meant to have a primarily defensive presence in a given sector (*quadrícula*).

It is also important to underline that the Rhodesian and South African officers, not least van der Waals (p. 329 ff.; p. 342), are more complimentary of the Portuguese conduct of the war in Angola, pointing to efforts to make even conscript troops more offensive-minded, and to use them in conjunction with special forces in multiple ambushes and long-term raids, in particular making the most of locally-recruited black Portuguese troops or

*GEs* and *Flechas* (the latter were paramilitary special forces under direct control of the fearful Portuguese secret service PIDE/DGS). As they also point out, some aspects of the Angolan model started to be exported to Mozambique, but this was a case of too little, too late.

Both authors – and, given his background, van der Waals’ testimony (p.309 *passim*) is especially significant in this respect – are critical of the great difficulties in achieving integrated command, pointing to the deep rivalry between the different services and report a strong elitism in both the Air Force and the Navy that made relations with the Army they were supposed to be supporting often difficult. They do give Marcelo Caetano some credit for trying to reinforce jointness of command both at the metropolitan level and by giving greater powers to the Commanders-in-Chief in each theater of operations. This should not be seen, however, as a specific problem faced by Portugal. Rather it was the South African and Rhodesian military that were exceptional in being relatively young and facing an imminent unconventional threat. As a result, they were less constrained by the centuries of organizational tradition that existed in more established armies, like the British, the French, or the Portuguese, in which the problem of how to improve jointness of command is still being discussed today. And even in the case of South Africa there have been references to division and tensions, if not necessarily along the traditional lines, then between the military proper and the intelligence powerhouse that was BOSS.

No less interesting is the fact that these Southern African allies of late colonial Portugal were also critical of the ability to develop an effective comprehensive approach, even though this was so central in Portuguese doctrine, given the absence of adequate civilian personnel and resources. Again, this problem of how to translate doctrine into practice, especially in its more socio-economic aspects, was not a problem that was unique to Portugal; rather, it was a recurrent complaint in these late colonial counterinsurgencies, similarly diagnosed for instance in French Algeria. It was a more acute problem in the more remote areas of these vast empires, like the arid regions of the South of Angola, of Cuito Cuanavale, tellingly known as *Terras do Fim do Mundo* – literally the end of the world. Van der Waals and Venter recognize that this huge remote region was understandably of marginal importance for the Portuguese, while being vital for South Africa for the protection of “their” Southwest Africa (Namibia). This was, of course, the region that saw the beginning of closer cooperation and the sharing of resources and capabilities between South Africa and Portugal. Al Venter (pp. 375 ff.) did encounter effective officers even in this remote region, not least in their strong commitment to winning over locals, such as

Captain Vítor Alves, who, to Venter's amazement, would become one of the leading figures in the military coup of April 25, 1974.

The value of van der Waals' testimony lies in being more closely aligned with the official views of the South African military and the military discourse of the time, including an appendix (van der Waals, pp. 426 ff.) devoted to counter-insurgency doctrine and vocabulary. This makes for a less lively book than Venter's. Van der Waals' book has also lost some of its novelty if compared with the first edition in English in 1993, when it provided a glimpse into South African archives that were then closed. This is much less true now, because recent publications by historians with access to Portuguese, South African and Rhodesian/Zimbabwean archives have provided a much clearer view of what is still a controversial topic – the real nature and depth of the Portuguese-South African-Rhodesian military cooperation in the so-called ALCORA framework.<sup>2</sup>

This being said, even in the case of the less revealing book by van der Waals, we once again have relevant information that does not seem to have made it to mainstream accounts of the war. The most significant example is that van der Waals (p. 273) reports that, according to South African intelligence, the anti-aircraft portable missile *Strella* that was being used to great effect by the PAIGC in Guinea-Bissau was being provided to the MPLA in Angola, and to FRELIMO.

\*\*\*

Are the points made by these authors to be taken at face value? The answer is, evidently, no. It is not because they provide direct testimonies of these campaign or because they are foreigners that they are necessarily right. After all, if Rhodesians were such good judges of how to conduct effective counter-insurgency in the African bush, why did they not resist more than five years after the retreat of the Portuguese troops, when Rhodesia/Zimbabwe became the new frontline of anti-colonial insurgency in Southern Africa?

Last but not least, these books show that even close allies of the Portuguese regime had a pessimistic view of the way the war was going, especially in Mozambique (and also,

---

<sup>2</sup> Luís Barroso, *Salazar, Caetano e o "Reduto Branco": A Manobra Político-Diplomática de Portugal na África Austral (1951-1974)* (Lisbon: Fronteira do Caos, 2012); Aniceto Afonso and Carlos Matos Gomes, *Alcora: O Acordo Secreto do Colonialismo* (Lisbon: Divina Comédia, 2013); Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses and Robert McNamara, "The Origins of Exercise ALCORA, 1960–71", *The International History Review*, Vol. 35, No. 5 (2013), 1113–1134; Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses and Robert McNamara, "Exercise ALCORA: Expansion and Demise, 1971–4", *The International History Review*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2014), 89–111.

but with less immediate consequences, in Guinea-Bissau). And yet even South Africans in close contact with the reality of the Portuguese wars in Africa and who had actually met some of the key players in the military coup of the 25 April 1974 – Vítor Alves and Otelo were points of contact for Al Venter – were surprised by this revolutionary event. Venter's comments about Otelo and Spínola, in particular, make it clear that outsiders' views can have major limitations, with Otelo being described as a great political intellectual and Spínola as a visionary thinker (Venter, pp. 272 ff.) The inability of South Africans to understand the political dynamics on the Portuguese side of the equation is less surprising if we take into account that their knowledge of metropolitan Portugal ranged from very limited to non-existent. And these Portuguese officers were evidently not going to confide their involvement in a coup, or even the full depth of their discontent to foreign correspondents or foreign military officers, much less from South Africa.

In conclusion, those without prior knowledge of metropolitan Portugal and its colonial history should treat these two books with some caution. The translation into Portuguese of both the books should have been more scrupulous: at certain points, it makes a number of passages difficult to understand. It is also regrettable that the Portuguese edition of these books was not used as an opportunity for the authors, in particular van der Waals, to engage directly with some of the more recent literature on these topics, and in particular about the ALCORA framework of cooperation between South Africa, Portugal, and Rhodesia. ALCORA is the missing elephant in the room in these two books.<sup>3</sup> Yet, if their limitations are taken into account, the two books are a useful addition of a significant foreign perspective to available sources in Portuguese, but they are also a reminder that foreign points of view cannot be confused with the real or full picture of these wars.

Received for publication: 18 August 2016

Accepted in revised form: 20 October 2016

Recebido para publicação: 18 de Agosto de 2016

Aceite após revisão: 20 de Outubro de 2016

---

<sup>3</sup> Van der Waals makes literally one guarded and brief reference to ALCORA at the very end of his book (p. 342) but unfortunately still feels bound by the need for state secrecy.