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The Colonial War revisited

Coding the military outcomes

Jeffrey Treistman

The Carnation Revolution on 25 April 1974 toppled the authoritarian regime in Lisbon. It is fallacious to conclude, however, that the 1974 coup d'état signaled Portugal's defeat in the Colonial War. The status of each conflict on the eve of the Carnation Revolution varied, and it was by no means inevitable that Portugal would have been defeated in all three theatres had the coup not occurred. This brief research note therefore advances a novel approach to examining the Colonial War by assessing the outcomes *prior* to the 1974 coup. In particular, the author proposes that Portugal achieved military victory in Angola and Mozambique, but was defeated in Guinea-Bissau.

Keywords Colonial War, insurgency, military outcomes, Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique

Between 1961 and 1974 Portugal was embroiled in three separate wars in its African colonies of Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique. Collectively known as the Colonial War, the origin of the conflicts stems from the post-World War II atmosphere of nationalism and anti-colonial fervour. Those living under the tutelage of Portugal's empire became frustrated with their continued subjugation, in contrast with Britain and France's reluctant efforts at decolonisation. Instead, Portugal remained obdurate to reform and repressed indigenous demands for independence.

Historians point to 4 February 1961 as the beginning of the Colonial War in Angola with the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola's (MPLA) assault on government targets throughout Luanda. The conflict in Guinea-Bissau began on 23 January 1963, when guerrillas associated with the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) attacked a Portuguese military installation. Finally, the Mozambican war

involving the Liberation Front of Mozambique (FRELIMO) started in a haphazard manner in September 1964.

Over the course of the Colonial War, Portugal expanded its military presence in Africa to approximately 169 000 troops.¹ Portuguese armed services added more than 140 000 new soldiers between 1960 and the early 1970s.² Nearly 50 per cent of the state's budget was devoted to fueling the war effort as the military underwent a systematic transformation to conduct operations on the African continent.³

The wars imposed a severe financial and social drain on Portugal. Many soldiers expressed resentment over inequitable promotions and salaries: 'Those sent to defend the colonies felt that they were being sacrificed and abandoned by the nation.'⁴ Meanwhile, the state was ill-prepared to assist the nearly 30 000 wounded veterans who returned from combat. The circumstances were further compounded by growing disillusionment among average Portuguese citizens as the anti-war movement gained traction. Opposition coalesced around the Armed Forces Movement (MFA), culminating in the Carnation Revolution on 25 April 1974 that toppled the authoritarian regime in Lisbon.

It is fallacious to conclude, however, that the 1974 coup d'état signaled Portugal's defeat in the Colonial War. The status of each conflict on the eve of the Carnation Revolution varied and it was by no means inevitable that Portugal would have been defeated in all three theatres had the coup not occurred. But the absence of any attempt to investigate the causal factors that led to the distinct military outcomes is a rather stark lacuna in the literature. Most studies are indiscriminate in their analysis and consider the outcome a *fait accompli*. Decolonisation and subsequent independence are erroneously interpreted as military defeat. Although many scholars acknowledge varying degrees of success in Portugal's counterinsurgency strategy, they nevertheless code the military outcome as a defeat. For example, John Cann declares: 'Portugal lost the war and ultimately its colonies.'⁵ Meanwhile, the 'Correlates of war' and the 'Correlates of insurgencies' – perhaps the two most prominent datasets available on warfare – both code the Colonial War as a Portuguese loss.⁶ But such coding schemes fail to differentiate between military and political dynamics of war.

This research note therefore advances a novel approach to examining the Colonial War by assessing the counterinsurgency outcomes *prior* to the 1974 coup. In particular, I propose that Portugal achieved military victory in Angola and Mozambique, but was defeated in Guinea-Bissau. Many scholars and former soldiers are now also revisiting the Colonial War, reassessing earlier conclusions.⁷ 'While [Portugal] lost its colonies,' argues Cann, 'it did not lose them because of military reasons.'⁸ Indeed, it is necessary to disaggregate the military outcomes in Africa from the political conflagration that engulfed Lisbon. Doing so will yield a more accurate account of Portugal's military performance and can inform contemporary counterinsurgency doctrine.

This brief article is divided into two parts. In the first section I explain my justification in coding the military outcomes of the Colonial War with particular emphasis on Mozambique. The second and final section discusses the implications of my findings and proposes avenues for future research.

Coding the military outcomes

Most scholars agree that by April 1974 Portugal had succeeded in neutralising the Angolan insurgency. 'In Angola,' writes DL Raby, 'the situation seemed relatively good for the

Portuguese.⁹ According to John Cann, Portugal produced a 'military victory in Angola that remained intact through the end of the war'.¹⁰ Thomas Henriksen also asserts that 'Angola was the securist [*sic*] of the former colonies for Lisbon'.¹¹

The historical record is equally unanimous in confirming Portugal's defeat in Guinea-Bissau. As Gérard Chaliand has noted, 'Only the PAIGC, from as early as 1966–68, gained serious military successes'.¹² 'The army had its back against the wall,' declares Porch.¹³ Meanwhile, Raby insists that 'Guiné [Guinea] was virtually a lost cause, with the PAIGC controlling most of the territory by the late sixties'.¹⁴

In contrast to Angola and Guinea-Bissau, there is no consensus on Mozambique and a vast spectrum of opinions is represented in the literature. Some analysts contend that Portugal thoroughly decimated insurgent forces, while others counter that FRELIMO was on the verge of victory.¹⁵ Most historians, however, are either ambiguous about the outcome or conflate Portuguese counterinsurgency operations with political discord in Lisbon. For example, Richard Leonard believes 'the most dramatic testimony of the Portuguese military failure is of course the coup in Portugal'.¹⁶

Those who maintain a more negative assessment can point to a rejuvenated insurgency beginning in 1972 with the opening of new fronts in the centre of the country. To be sure, Portugal was never able permanently to extirpate insurgent elements. But the continued presence of guerrillas does not necessarily equate to counterinsurgent defeat. An analogous case is the unremitting insurgency in Ireland, where splinter organisations of the Provisional Irish Republican Army continued to undertake terrorist activities despite the conclusion of official hostilities.

Other scholars who reject any notion of a Portuguese victory in Mozambique may highlight the steady increase in casualties as the war progressed. But combat casualty rates are notorious for being an imprecise measure of war outcomes. For example, the United States (US) failed to exact North Vietnam's capitulation despite imposing heavy losses through a 'war of attrition'. Such indices are further distorted when taking into account incumbent troop strength. Without consideration of other exogenous variables the correlation between the number of soldiers and casualties can only indicate the degree of counterinsurgent exposure rather than the strength of the insurgency itself. Indeed, military planners often anticipate a higher death rate as more troops are deployed. In the Colonial War, the number of casualties increased as Portugal injected more soldiers into the Mozambican theatre. This mirrors the experience of the US during the 2007 Iraq 'surge', in which the introduction of additional troops corresponded to a higher casualty rate. Nevertheless, John Cann has found that Portugal's casualty rate was comparatively lower than other wars of the same period. According to Cann, the low death rate during the Colonial War 'reinforces the achievement of Portuguese policy'.¹⁷

We can employ discourse analysis to measure the extent of insurgent success by using their own declared objectives as a benchmark. Insurgents proclaimed the Cabora Bassa hydroelectric dam, a massive construction project in Mozambique funded by international investors, to be a primary target in their operations. According to FRELIMO's president, Eduardo Mondlane, 'If we do not destroy the Cabora Bassa scheme, or at least make it twice as costly, we shall have received our greatest setback'.¹⁸ But the insurgents failed in their endeavour. Construction of the dam continued unimpeded and in fact ahead of schedule. For their part, Lisbon cited the dam as evidence of its long-term intention of remaining in Africa and its protection indicative of Portugal's capacity to secure its colonial possessions. As far as Lisbon was concerned, the wars would be deemed a success provided that it continued to reap the

economic benefits. The Portuguese were fortuitous that counterinsurgency operations were adequate in protecting economic interests in Mozambique. According to Lawrence Graham,

Irregardless of the logistical problems in protecting Portuguese enclaves in the north and in the center, especially the perimeter surrounding the Cabora Bassa dam project, military action was sufficient to protect productive urban and rural areas concentrated in the south and extending northward to the center of the colony.¹⁹

The inability of insurgents to thwart the dam's construction belies any assertion that they were successful.

Economic performance can also be referenced as a barometer of insurgent success. Palmira Tjipilica and Nuno Valério's factor analysis of the Portuguese colonies found the wars had little impact on overall economic health.²⁰ They observe continued growth and even note that military expenditures stimulated the indigenous economy. Their findings are substantiated by observing trade fluctuations. For example, Table 1 exhibits yearly exports of each colony during the wars.²¹ The decline in exports from Guinea-Bissau and the increase in exports from Angola and Mozambique validate the proposition that Portugal lost in Guinea-Bissau but was triumphant in Angola and Mozambique.

Table 1 Colonial exports (in thousands of escudos)

Date	Angola	Guinea-Bissau	Mozambique
1961	3 874	211	2 733
1962	4 264	189	2 616
1963	4 684	166	2 896
1964	5 868	156	3 043
1965	5 747	106	3 106
1966	6 359	85	3 223
1967	6 838	91	3 500
1968	7 788	87	4 459
1969	9 387	105	4 080
1970	12 172	90	4 497
1971	12 147	57	4 613
1972	13 923	69	4 768
1973	19 158	80	5 541

Source Tjipilica and Valério, *Economic activity in the Portuguese colonial empire*, 2006

A more positive rendition of the military outcome in Mozambique is therefore warranted. For example, *The Times* reported that Portugal had captured all major insurgent bases in north-east Mozambique and that guerrilla activity had declined.²² This is consistent with Norrie MacQueen's analysis in which he questions the insurgents' capacity to continue operations beyond 1974, considering that their supplies were overextended and FRELIMO remained

plagued by internal dissension.²³ In the end, insurgents had only a tenuous grip on small areas of Mozambique. Their constituency was limited to a particular ethnic group, and by no means did they achieve universal support. Porch maintains that 'the army in Mozambique had more or less contained the FRELIMO'.²⁴ Ian Beckett argues that Portugal was well positioned to achieve 'outright victory in Mozambique'.²⁵ Although Beckett acknowledges that 'the Portuguese had growing problems in Mozambique by 1974', he believes such setbacks were 'not serious enough to suggest that they were in any sense losing the war'.²⁶ Walter Opello also concludes that the 'balance of military force in Mozambique was, at the time of the coup, generally in favor of the Portuguese'.²⁷

In light of the above analysis, this research note advances the proposition that Portugal was militarily successful in Mozambique prior to the 1974 coup in Lisbon. This determination is consistent with Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson's research in which they define a counterinsurgency victory occurring when 'the insurgency is militarily defeated and its organization destroyed or the war ends without any political concessions granted to insurgent forces'.²⁸ To be sure, Portugal was quite intransigent to heeding insurgent demands. Moreover, the positive trend in Mozambican exports and its thriving economic status imply the pacification of the population and neutralisation of violence, consequently resulting in a degree of stability during which colonial ambitions could be undertaken. As long as Portugal was able to continue extracting desired resources from the colony – its primary objective – then the outcome can be deemed a success.²⁹

The ultimate contention that Portugal achieved military victory in both Angola and Mozambique is echoed by a number of other scholars. For example, Malyn Newitt submits a rather sanguine evaluation of Portugal's performance. Up until the collapse of the regime in Lisbon, he argues that in many cases Portugal was able to win on the diplomatic, economic and military fronts. Newitt declares that 'Portugal's counter-insurgency had proved remarkably successful – successful, that is, as long as nobody questioned the long-term future'.³⁰ Citing Lawrence Graham's study of the Portuguese military, James Fearon and David Laitin observe that 'most military analyses conclude that the Portuguese army had won the war in Angola and sustained a booming economy. Mozambique was less successful from a military standpoint, but not a failure. Only in Guinea-Bissau was the military situation hopeless'.³¹

Implications and future research

The preceding examination attempts to advance the proposition that prior to the 1974 coup, Portugal achieved military victory in Angola and Mozambique, but was defeated in Guinea-Bissau. By no means do I intend to suggest that my analysis is conclusive. Rather, the goal is merely to encourage a more nuanced historical debate and stimulate future research.

This research note challenges conventional wisdom that a causal linkage exists between Portugal's military performance and the loss of its colonial holdings. In fact, the record demonstrates that the Portuguese military performed quite well when the conflicts are considered as separate enterprises. While the Colonial War certainly contributed to the regime's collapse the results indicate that other factors at the domestic level of analysis contain far greater explanatory power than Portugal's counterinsurgency strategy. The implications are significant for both scholars interested in African colonial history and students of counterinsurgency theory more generally.

Divorced from the political fiasco in Lisbon, the military results of the Colonial War can yield a better understanding of the historical record. The literature would benefit from future scholars who seek to quantify the results in order to supersede the prevailing qualitative ambiguity. One way in which analysts could measure the strength of the insurgency is to tally the number of offensive guerrilla attacks. Mustafah Dhada has already completed such painstaking calculations on the Guinean insurgency.³² This task will be no easy feat, however, and will likely require years of diligent archival research spanning several countries.³³ Moreover, methodological integrity will necessitate the cross-referencing of guerrilla reports, but the results will likely be biased since insurgents often exaggerated their successes.³⁴

Lastly, contemporary military strategists can obtain invaluable knowledge regarding those counterinsurgency tactics that proved most effective during the Colonial War. Indeed, lessons learned from the African wars can contribute to the refinement of current counterinsurgency doctrine and help inform NATO allies.³⁵ This would be particularly worthwhile as Portugal remains an active participant in various military operations around the world. Troops have been deployed to both Iraq and Afghanistan, even suffering casualties in the latter conflict. They are also engaged in peace-keeping missions in East Timor, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo. Perhaps even more relevant, Portugal continues to maintain a presence on the African continent as it trains security forces in Somalia and Uganda.

According to Rosa Cabecinhas and João Feijó, ‘For about twenty-five years there was a “period of mourning”, where speaking about the Colonial War and the decolonization process was taboo.’³⁶ Generations of both soldiers and civilians have been scarred by the trauma of conflict. But now that the fog of war has settled, a more precise understanding of the military outcomes is needed to rectify the historical record and may go a long way in healing the wounds of war endured by both Portuguese and Africans alike. This brief article is an attempt to engender such discussion and motivate readers of the *African Security Review* to assume the mantle of future research.

Notes

- 1 Aniceto Afonso and Carlos de Matos Gomes, *Guerra colonial*, Lisboa: Editorial Notícias, 2000, 15.
- 2 Norrie MacQueen, *The decolonization of Portuguese Africa: metropolitan revolution and the dissolution of empire*, London: Longman, 1997, 76. Other scholars (e.g. Gérard Chaliand, *The struggle for Africa: conflict of the great powers*, London: Macmillan, 1982, 20) offer even higher estimates of Portuguese mobilisation.
- 3 It should be noted that estimates of actual expenditures vary among historians. For a low-end estimation see Estado-Maior de Exercito, *Resenha histórico-militar das campanhas de África: 1961–1974*, 2nd ed, Lisboa: EME, CECA, 1988. For a high-end estimation see DL Raby, *Fascism and resistance in Portugal*, New York: Manchester University Press, 1988.
- 4 Douglas Porch, *The Portuguese armed forces and the revolution*, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, 1977, 29.
- 5 John Cann, *Counterinsurgency in Africa: the Portuguese way of war, 1961–1974*, Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1997, 194. Similarly, Thomas Henriksen argues that the insurgents ‘ultimately defeated Portugal’s colonial efforts’ (Henriksen, ‘People’s war in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau’, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 14(3) (1976), 377–399).
- 6 David Singer and Melvin Small, *Correlates of war project: international and civil war data, 1816–1992*, Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], ICPSR09905, 1994. ‘Correlates of insurgencies’ is the colloquial name given to the dataset that accompanies the ‘Rage against the machines’ article; see Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson, ‘Rage against the machines: explaining outcomes in counterinsurgency wars’, *International Organization* 63(1) (2009), 67–106.
- 7 I am grateful to Norrie MacQueen for bringing this to my attention.
- 8 Cann, *Counterinsurgency in Africa*, 187.
- 9 DL Raby, *Fascism and resistance in Portugal*, New York: Manchester University Press, 1988, 245.

- 10 Cann, *Counterinsurgency in Africa*, 194.
- 11 Henriksen, People's war in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau, 396. Other scholars present similar findings. Porch asserts that 'the war in Angola was going well' (Porch, *The Portuguese armed forces and the revolution*, 53). Malyn Newitt also finds that 'Portugal retained its control of Angola, and over most of its population and its economic resources' (Newitt, *Portugal in Africa: the last hundred years*, London: Hurst, 1981, 241).
- 12 Chaliand, *The struggle for Africa*, 20.
- 13 Porch, *The Portuguese armed forces and the revolution*, 53.
- 14 Raby, *Fascism and resistance in Portugal*, 245. It should be acknowledged that a minority of scholars offer a more restrained assessment of the Guinean theatre. For example, Henriksen argues that 'The war had reached a standoff – neither side could force a decision' (Henriksen, People's war in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau, 35).
- 15 MacQueen, *The decolonization of Portuguese Africa*, 124, notes 2–3.
- 16 Richard Leonard, Frelimo's victories in Mozambique, *Journal of Opinion* 4(2) (1974), 38–46.
- 17 Cann, *Counterinsurgency in Africa*, 190.
- 18 Newitt, *Portugal in Africa*, 232. Newitt also adds that FRELIMO 'had made its international campaign against the dam a test of its strength vis-à-vis the regime' (ibid, 235).
- 19 Lawrence Graham, *The Portuguese military and the state: rethinking transitions in Europe and Latin America*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993, 18.
- 20 Palmira Tjipilica and Nuno Valério, Economic activity in the Portuguese colonial empire: a factor analysis approach, Paper presented at the 14th International Economic History Congress, Helsinki, Finland, August 2006.
- 21 It should be noted, however, that trade gradually diversified over the course of the Colonial War and Portugal was not necessarily the exclusive recipient.
- 22 Dan van der Vat, Mozambique guerrilla losses, *The Times*, 23 December 1970, 8.
- 23 MacQueen, *The decolonization of Portuguese Africa*, 125.
- 24 Porch, *The Portuguese armed forces and the revolution*, 53.
- 25 Ian FW Beckett, *Modern insurgencies & counter-insurgencies: guerrillas and their opponents since 1750*, New York: Routledge, 2001, 142.
- 26 Ibid, 144.
- 27 Walter C Opello, Jr, Guerrilla war in Portuguese Africa: an assessment of the balance of force in Mozambique, *Journal of Opinion* 4(2) (1974): 29–37.
- 28 Lyall and Wilson, 'Rage against the machines', 1.
- 29 It should be acknowledged that another colonial objective was to 'civilize' the indigenous population. Possession of the African colonies also constituted Portugal's identity of being a global empire. According to Prime Minister Marcello Caetano, 'Without [Africa] we would be a small nation; with it, we are a great country' (Beckett, *Modern insurgencies & counter-insurgencies*, 130).
- 30 Newitt, *Portugal in Africa*, 242.
- 31 James Fearon and David Laitin, Portugal, Unpublished manuscript, Stanford University, 2005, 17. See also Graham, *The Portuguese military and the state*.
- 32 See Mustafah Dhada, *Warriors at work: how Guinea was really set free*, Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1993.
- 33 I am grateful to Mustafah Dhada for sharing his research experiences.
- 34 See, for example, John Marcum, Three revolutions, *Africa Report* 12(8) (1967), 8–22.
- 35 See, for example, Jeffrey Treistman, Home away from home: dynamics of counterinsurgency warfare, *Comparative Strategy* 31(3) (2012), 235–252.
- 36 Rosa Cabecinhas and João Feijó, Collective memories of Portuguese colonial action in Africa: representations of the colonial past among Mozambicans and Portuguese youths, *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 4(1) (2010), 28–44.