

**Meritorious account of war now dated****W.S. van der Waals, *Portugal's War in Angola, 1961–1974***

Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2011

320 pp

ISBN 978-1-86919-351-5

R225.00

This is the second edition of a book first published in 1993,<sup>19</sup> based on a doctoral dissertation entitled, “Angola, 1961–1974: ’n Studie in Rewolusionêre Oorlog” that the author submitted at the University of the Orange Free State, as it then was, four years previously. That study was written in part to suggest lessons for South Africa, and in this second edition Van der Waals still argues that Portugal had been up against “revolutionary warfare” in Angola, that the insurgency had been dealt with militarily, so that it became “little more than a nuisance value” (p 159), but that Portugal had lost “control over the process of decolonisation” (back cover), with disastrous results. Angola became “a strategic Soviet base”, liberation struggles elsewhere were given “new impetus”, and South Africa “fell directly in the revolutionary firing line” (p 280). An appendix discusses the theory of “revolutionary warfare”, and suggests ways to counter it (pp 291ff). All this seems strangely dated in 2011, but this book is essentially a reprint of the first edition: the book has been reset and some of the photographs in the first edition are no longer included – in particular those of bare-breasted “tribal” women – but most of the original photographs are reproduced here and the text remains the same, “except for minor historical changes to the preface” (p xv).

The book under review, then, has not been updated to take account of any of the literature in the intervening almost two decades, or of new perspectives on what happened in Angola before and after the coup in Lisbon in April 1974, when this study effectively ends. The Alvor agreement that followed in January 1975 is merely mentioned and an Epilogue takes the story very briefly to 1992, when Angola is said to have been “set to get its first freely elected and representative government” (p 281). We are not told that Savimbi did not accept the result of the election held in that year and went back to war, and that it was only with his death in 2002 that the war came to an end.

Willem van der Waals served for 33 years in the South African Defence Force (SADF) as paratrooper, unit commander, intelligence analyst, and strategic planner. As the Portuguese withdrew from Angola in 1975, he was one of the SADF’s liaison officers to Jonas Savimbi’s UNITA.<sup>20</sup> In the early 1980s he was South African Defence attache in Paraguay. None of his career after 1974 is discussed in this book, however. What is mentioned is that he was vice-consul at the South African Consulate-General in Angola from 1970 for almost four years. This posting made him well placed to write a book on Portugal’s war in Angola, and as a former SADF officer he was able to draw upon sources that were not declassified. This new edition, like the first, provides no detailed references to these sources, merely saying that they are to be found in the author’s thesis held in the SADF Archives in Pretoria (p 300).

19. W. van der Waals, *Portugal's War in Angola, 1961–1974* (Ashanti Publishing, Rivonia, 1993).

20. He helped arrange for land rovers and anti-tank missiles to be delivered to Savimbi, and briefly secured Lobito harbour and the Benguela railway line to Zambia. See P. Wolvaardt et al. (compilers), *From Verwoerd to Mandela: South African Diplomats Remember*, 1 (Crink, no place, 2010), pp 34, 36.

We now have major studies of the long Angolan civil war; of the role of the Cubans in Angola; and of South Africa's military involvement in Angola from 1975 to 1988; as well as relevant memoirs by some participants in these events. The book under review is only concerned with the war that Portugal fought in Angola from 1961 to 1974. It provides a relatively well-written and well-ordered politico-military account of the origins of the conflict, of the outbreak of the war in 1961 and then of the ways in which the Portuguese dealt with northern Angola, reducing it to what the author calls a "human desert" (p 97), of the relatively low-intensity war from 1962 to 1966, of the MPLA's campaign in eastern Angola from 1967 and of how the Portuguese again were able to counter this in the years that followed. Only when he comes to the background to the coup in Portugal in 1974 does Van der Waals spend any space relating what was happening in Angola to the wars that Portugal was also fighting elsewhere in Africa. He then suggests that it was what happened in Guinea-Bissau that was mainly responsible for the Portuguese withdrawing from their African possessions. He adds: "An attempt to sacrifice Guinea in order to concentrate on the defence of Angola and Mozambique would have led to an insurmountable legitimacy crisis" (p 281).

South African readers will probably be most interested in what Van der Waals has to say about the close military co-operation that developed between Portugal and South Africa in response to the rise of guerrilla forces among nationalists in Angola, Namibia and what is now Zimbabwe. Two decades before Cuito Cuanavale became so well-known in South Africa because of the way in which the Cubans defended it against the SADF, South Africa and Portugal had set up a joint air command post there, and from 1968 Menongue was the centre of South African-Portuguese military cooperation in southeastern Angola (pp 228–229). The South African government provided a large loan to Portugal to help it fight the war in Angola the month before the coup in Lisbon. But Van der Waals does not discuss this co-operation in any depth. Anyone wishing to pursue either the nature of Portugal's war in Angola or the role of South Africa in that war will have to turn to the material that has become available since this book was written. The best overall context in English is provided by the British scholar David Birmingham, who, unlike Van der Waals, has a deep understanding of Angolan nationalism.<sup>21</sup> On Portugal's relations with South Africa there is now the unpublished University of Johannesburg thesis by Paulo Correia, which draws upon South African and Portuguese records in Pretoria and Lisbon that Van der Waals did not use.<sup>22</sup> For all the merits of the book first published in 1993, then, it is a great pity that this "second edition" was not even provided with a new introduction that might have referred to this new work and pointed to the ways in which Van der Waals' account is now dated.

Chris Saunders  
University of Cape Town

- 
21. D. Birmingham, *Empire in Africa: Angola and its Neighbours* (Ohio University Press, Athens, OH, 2006). Compare also J.P. Cann, *Counterinsurgency in Africa: The Portuguese Way of War, 1961–1974* (Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn, 1997); and L.M. Alves de Fraga, *A Força Aérea na Guerra em África: Angola, Guiné, Moçambique, 1961–1974* (Prefácio, Lisbon, 2004). Van der Waals does not cite D. Birmingham, *Frontline Nationalism in Angola and Mozambique* (James Currey, London, 1992), or A. Humbaraci and N. Muchnik, *Portugal's African Wars: Angola, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique* (Third Press, New York, 1974).
22. P. Correia, "Political Relations between Portugal and South Africa from the End of the Second World War to 1974", DLitt et Phil thesis, University of Johannesburg, 2007. See also P. Correia and G. Verhoef, "Portugal and South Africa: Close Allies or Unwilling Partners in Southern Africa during the Cold War?", *Scientia Militaria*, 37, 1, 2009, pp 50–72.