

Book Review

A Spectre Haunting a Journalist and a Devastated Land

Fred Bridgland, *The Guerrilla and the Journalist: Exploring the Murderous Legacy of Jonas Savimbi*

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In 1986, British journalist Fred Bridgland published the first, and to date the only full-length English language biography of Jonas Savimbi,¹ the leader of UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola). The mammoth volume raised the profile of Savimbi and elevated the guerrilla to a pantheon that included his idol Mao Zedong and his reputed friend, Che Guevera.² Apparently unbeknown to Bridgland, Savimbi was already exhibiting the worst excesses of Mao: the elimination of all potential rivals to his ironclad control of the rebel armed group. What Bridgland could not have foreseen was that Savimbi was destined to die in the same undignified manner as Guevera with the reputation that he had helped cultivate in tatters (255).³

Bridgland's biography of Savimbi garnered mixed reviews that ranged from 'favourable to damning, to a large extent depending on reviewers' preconceptions and ideological sympathies' (150). The author admits that this was understandable given the controversial nature of his subject matter and acknowledges his own

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1. F. Bridgland, *Jonas Savimbi: Key to Africa* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1986). A Portuguese-language biography by F. Emidio, *Jonas Savimbi, No lado Errado de História* (Alfragide: Quixote, 2012) has not been translated into English.
2. According to Bridgland, *Jonas Savimbi*, 74-8, Savimbi, first encountered Guevera at a meeting in Dar-es-Salaam and then engaged further with him when he travelled with the Argentinian-born revolutionary to attend an Afro-Asian Solidarity Seminar in Algiers in 1964. In *The Guerrilla and the Journalist*, 160, Bridgland mentions two long meetings with Guevera in Tanzania and Algeria in 1965. However, E. George, *Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965-1991* (London: Routledge, 2012), 23, discredits the story of Savimbi's friendship with Guevera.
3. Che's over-inflated reputation as a guerrilla strategist owes something to his role in Castro's Sierra Maestra campaign that culminated in the ousting of Cuban dictator Batista but his adventures in the Congo and Bolivia were ignominious failures. In fact, Guevera's legendary status as a revolutionary figure can be ascribed largely to the dissemination and popularisation of Alberto Korda's iconic photograph of Guevera on billboards, posters, t-shirts. etc. that have made him the quintessential symbol of radical chic. See T. Ziff (ed.), *Che Guevera: Revolutionary & Icon* (New York City: Abrams Image, 2006).

partisanship. However, Bridgland dismisses criticisms that his work amounts to hagiography or that he had created the Savimbi personality cult. He holds that Savimbi was deserving of a more balanced treatment by the media. However, the American media studies scholar Elaine Windrich contends that Bridgland's biography was a work of propaganda and that the journalist accepted at face value much of what he was told by the UNITA leader and his retinue.⁴ As late as 2002, following Savimbi's death and the revelations about his bizarre behaviour, Bridgland still insisted that the biography had not been entirely discredited and that his 'strategic analyses' holds up.⁵

The Guerrilla and the Journalist provides clues as to why Bridgland came to write Savimbi's biography. He had scored a major scoop as Reuters' Central African correspondent when he published a widely syndicated article that identified South African troops masquerading as mercenaries in Angola in 1975.⁶ This story played out in the international media as intervention by the 'white racist regime' in the civil war on the side of a power-hungry warlord. Savimbi justified UNITA's aid from the apartheid state as necessary for UNITA's survival (87). But such special pleading did not wash with the international community. The story had caused wavering black African states (notably Nigeria) to withdraw their support for UNITA and to recognise the MPLA as the legitimate ruling party in Angola despite there having been no election. Thus, Bridgland's reporting of the story earned him respect in the eyes of readers who condemned Savimbi's alliance with the apartheid state. To underscore his own credentials, Bridgland points out that he had been a member of the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) and naively believed his work as a journalist might contribute to the liberation of white-minority regimes (1-2). But his rider that the complexities of African politics inclined him to set aside his preconceptions and develop a more sophisticated grasp of Savimbi's role in the Angolan cauldron of the Cold War amounts to dissembling.

Bridgland penned the biography with the assistance of Pedro 'Tito' Chingunji. Tito (as he was known) was the son of Jonatao, a founding member of UNITA and patriarch of the Chingunji clan. Bridgland made the acquaintance of Tito during his first visit to Angola in 1975/6. The twenty-year old Tito was in charge of Savimbi's bodyguards. As such, he was part of Savimbi's trusted inner circle, an interlocutor who facilitated access to the guerrilla leader. Although a self-taught English speaker, Tito's flair for languages made him an able communicator. The two men established

4. E. Windrich, *Cold War Guerrilla: Jonas Savimbi, the U.S. Media, and the Angolan War* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992), 175.

5. See Ofeibe Quist-Arcton, 'Angola: Don't Simplify History says Savimbi Biographer', Interview with Fred Bridgland, allAfrica.com, 25 June 2002, <https://allafrica.com/stories/200206250743.html> (accessed 17 May 2019).

6. They were part of a contingent of SADF soldiers involved in Operation Savannah. For more details on South Africa's intervention in Angola, see, for instance L. Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War 1966-1989* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2013), 7-32.

a rapport which became the basis for a good working relationship and long-lasting friendship. Tito briefed Bridgland ‘frequently on the state of the conflict and on UNITA’s history’ (xiii).

At the time, UNITA was fighting for its very existence in the face of a joint FAPLA (Popular Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola)-Cuban offensive. Remnants of the group survived only by withdrawing from the central highlands and enduring a gruelling six-month journey (known in UNITA’s folklore as the ‘Long March’) into the remote forest bases in the south-west of the country. Before his departure, Bridgland made a half-hearted promise to write a book about UNITA should it survive to fight another day. Like most observers, he believed that UNITA was a spent force. He was proved wrong.

In 1980, Bridgland was invited to Morocco by Tito and persuaded that ‘the best way of telling the UNITA story was by making the book a semi-biography of Savimbi’ (p. 70). UNITA had, in the interim, managed to fight a rear-guard action against FAPLA with weapons supplied by Morocco and the People’s Republic of China transported via Zaire. In addition, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states provided the funding for the public relations firm of Black, Manafort, Stone and Kelly (BMSK) to lobby the support of right-wing Republicans and conservative Christians in the USA. Its purpose was to obtain the repeal of the Clark Amendment to the U.S. Arms Control Export Act of 1976 that prohibited aid to Angola’s warring parties and, consequently channel CIA funds to UNITA. Their campaign pursued this objective by bolstering Savimbi’s image in the West as Angola’s saviour, engaged in a struggle against godless Marxism in which Moscow and its proxy, Cuba, backed the MPLA. While Bridgland did not view the world order in such Manichean terms, he accepted the Cold War logic that the freedom of African continent was threatened by communism (67).

By the time Bridgland began researching and writing the book, Tito had been posted to London. Through Tito’s contacts, Bridgland undertook further visits to Angola during the early 1980s. He was able to observe UNITA’s operations first-hand when he accompanied its units in the field. Although Bridgland had reservations about UNITA’s summary execution of captured Cubans (57, 95) and the extraction of ransom or concessions from foreign governments for the return of captured civilians (93, 143), he was less concerned about the abduction and ‘resettlement’ of women and children (123, 125, 143). His description of UNITA’s modus operandi in *The Guerrilla and the Journalist*, rehashes some of the content of the earlier biography. And in the re-telling, his admiration of these ‘remarkable guerrillas’ (124) is undiminished.

By his account, Bridgland was unaware of Savimbi's true nature until 1988 when Tito Chingunji, by now UNITA's representative in Washington, divulged that Savimbi's public persona was the antithesis of the vainglorious autocrat who manifested megalomaniac and paranoid tendencies in his conduct in UNITA's Jamba stronghold. Savimbi surrounded himself with sycophants. His camp followers and even the politburo did his bidding as much out of fear for their own lives as on account of a belief in Savimbi's infallibility. UNITA's 'state within a state' was little more than Savimbi's personal fiefdom where one cockerel ruled the roost.

Bridgland relates an appalling pattern of atrocities committed on Savimbi's orders. This litany includes purges, show trials, witchcraft burnings, arbitrary imprisonment and executions, personal vendettas, sexual predation and other 'excesses' that became more frequent as the war increased in intensity. Tito Chingunji's treatment by Savimbi exemplifies the UNITA leader's Machiavellianism. At the time, Bridgland was sworn to secrecy by Tito and received death threats from Savimbi's operatives if he revealed Savimbi's crimes. Accordingly, Bridgland was able to go public only after confirmation of Tito's death in 1991, three years after he first learned about Savimbi's 'murderous legacy'.

Bridgland deduces three reasons for Tito Chingunji's remaining silent: first, he learned that many members of his clan had already been killed on Savimbi's orders and that the Chingunji name was tantamount to a death sentence (177); second, he sought to protect his own family who were held as hostages by Savimbi from reprisals; and, third, because he believed that the revelations would undo his hard-won diplomatic success in advancing the cause of a ceasefire with the MPLA. Tito was regarded as UNITA's 'voice of reason' and as a proponent of reconciliation he was publicly praised by Savimbi while being castigated in private. Notwithstanding Savimbi's duplicity, Tito wished to keep the peace process on track at least until the first multiparty elections were held. Tito was committed to UNITA as a movement that could represent the interests of the Angolan people rather than to supporting Savimbi's pursuit of power for its own sake. Unfortunately, Tito's rationale was self-deceptive because the closer that Savimbi came to realising his dream of becoming president of Angola, the more intoxicating the whiff of power became (194, 198). He was incapable of sharing the limelight with anyone in the movement and all had to be subservient to him. Eventually, Savimbi recalled Tito from Washington to Jamba – ostensibly to promote him to deputy secretary-general as a reward for his diplomatic achievements but, actually, to clip his wings. Savimbi saw Tito as a contender for vice president of the party and hence a potential rival (168). He subjected Tito to a show trial, torture and a gruesome death. It was precisely because Tito's star was rising in UNITA and in diplomatic circles that he was eliminated as a rival (154). Bridgland's understandable caution meant that he deferred joining the growing chorus of Savimbi's detractors.

Meanwhile, damning disclosures about Savimbi's misconduct came from defectors, human rights activists, academics and other commentators. According to Bridgland, Gill Nevins, Amnesty International's Angola specialist, was the first to alert the world to 'UNITA officials being extra-judicially executed' (208).⁷ Other influential opinion makers who condemned Savimbi's behaviour included a former UNITA political commissar and author of the novel *The Patriot* (1992), Sousa Jamba. He published a piece in *The Spectator* in March 1989 that exposed Savimbi's many contradictions: inter alia, an intellectual who would not tolerate the autonomy of any others in the movement (210). Leon Dash, a reporter for *The Washington Post* who, like Bridgland, had been seduced by Savimbi's charisma when he had spent time behind the lines with UNITA in the 1970s, disavowed his previous portrayal of his impressive leadership qualities. Following an interview with a trusted source in August 1990, he published an article that labelled Savimbi a 'mass murderer' (183, 258-9). But others in the know, such as CIA agents and SADF advisers, chose to turn a blind eye to their client's capricious behaviour.

So, what is the *raison d'être* for the book? It is not merely an exposé of Savimbi's brutality. Bridgland's primary concern is to publicise Tito's story and explain his own part in it.⁸ Critics might argue that *The Guerrilla and the Journalist* is a cynical ploy on the part of the author to salvage his reputation and salve his conscience. However, it also serves as a timely reminder that Angolans need better role models and heroes. Certainly, a case could be made that Tito's story is a morality tale in which he sacrificed his life for the greater good.

But what does Bridgland's book do for Savimbi's place in public memory? Whereas Savimbi's reputation has been tarnished in mainstream western media and scholarship, there are outliers who regard him as Africa's greatest guerrilla leader.⁹ Moreover, his renown as a 'freedom fighter' is redolent among the rump of UNITA supporters and a new generation of political activists alienated by the nepotism and

7. W. Minter, *Apartheid's Contras: An Inquiry into the Roots of Conflict in Angola and Mozambique* (London: Zed Books, 1994), 5, 154, 222-3 notes that allegations that Savimbi had ordered the execution of potential rivals to his leadership of UNITA first surfaced in the Portuguese press and in Amnesty International reports in 1988 but were ignored by the mainstream US media.

8. Bridgland's book proposal was mooted as early as 2004. However, it appears that in the aftermath of Savimbi's death, publishers showed scant interest in the manuscript. See F. Bridgland, 'Death in Africa: A Proposal for a Book about the Life and Death of Tito Chingunji and his Family', 2004, <http://www.coldtype.net/Assets.04/Essays.04/Tito.pdf> (accessed 22 May 2019). The web page has since been taken down. See also Bridgland, *Cuito Cuanavale: 12 Months of War that Transformed a Continent* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2017), 10.

9. A.J. Venter, *Mercenaries* (Oxford: Casemate, 2014), 246-7; P. Polack, *Guerrilla Warfare: Kings of Revolution* (Oxford: Casemate, 2018), 123-135.

other failings of the ruling party in post-war Angola.¹⁰ While Savimbi's remains have been exhumed from an unmarked pauper's grave and reburied with the sanction of the MPLA as a belated gesture of reconciliation,¹¹ his spectre still haunts the devastated land. It remains to be seen whether Savimbi, once declared a war criminal by the MPLA,¹² can be rehabilitated from beyond the grave.

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10. J. Pearce, 'How to Remember Jonas Savimbi', *Africa is a Country*, 10 January 2018, <https://africasacountry.com/2018/10/how-to-remember-savimbi> (accessed 16 October 2021); V. Martins, "'A nossa lâmpada não se apaga": The Mnemonic Return of Angola's Jonas Savimbi', *African Studies Review*, 64, 1 (2020), 242-265.
 11. Unattributed, 'Jonas Savimbi: Angola's former rebel leader to be reburied after 17 years', *BBC News*, 1 June 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-48483246>; Unattributed, 'Angolan Ex-Rebel leader Reburied after 17 Years', *NDTV*, 2 June 2018, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/angola-ex-rebel-leader-jonas-savimbi-reburied-17-years-after-death-2046649>; Y. Rarieya, 'Body of Angolan warlord to be exhumed', *CGTN Africa*, 21 August 2018, <https://africa.cgtn.com/2018/08/21/body-of-angolan-warlord-jonas-savimbi-to-be-exhumed/> (accessed 18 October 2022).
 12. G. Lamb, 'Putting Belligerents in Context: The Cases of Namibia and Angola' in Simon Chesterman, ed. *Civilians in War* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 36.