



experiences
and facts

THE MERCENARIES OF THE EMPIRE

BASIL DAVIDSON

Portugal, the most backward and the poorest of all the European nations, annually invests almost half its budget in its efforts to hold on to its colonies in Africa, which as a whole comprise a territory twenty times bigger than its own. How to explain then Portugal's obdurate colonialist policy? What role does it really play in the African continent? What power is secretly acting behind the Portuguese dictatorship? And on the other hand, how is the liberation struggle of these peoples submitted to the most abject of all colonialisms coming along?

Basil Davidson, reputed British journalist and writer, tells the readers of *Tricontinental* all about it in this exclusive article.

Davidson specialized in the study of the Portuguese Colonies after his visit to Angola in 1954. One of his books, *The African Awakening*, published in 1955, denounces the forced labor to which Angolans are submitted. Since the latter part of the '50s, when they were established, the author has kept in touch with the liberation movements of Angola, Guinea (B), and Mozambique. Invited by PAIGC and FRELIMO, he recently visited the liberated areas in the last two countries. Such a background makes his article a valuable contribution to the study and understanding of African reality today.

THERE IS something terribly absurd about Portuguese imperialism in the 1960s. Here is one of the poorest countries in all Europe, nearly half of whose ten million people are poor peasants deprived of all effective education or access to the modern world, insisting on the right to rule African territories nearly twenty times as big as the "mother country." Here is "a civilising mission" operated in the name of a people who have themselves been the mere objects of military and fascist dictatorship for the past 42 years. Here are all the highflown

words of "European trusteeship" reduced in practice — in Angola, in Guinea-Bissau, in Mozambique — to the squalid misery of forced labour, starvation wages, organised contempt for African humanity, and bitter police and military repression. Here, lastly, is a colonial system which claims to be inspired by "no kind of racial discrimination" — but whose laws, practices, and daily attitudes regard 99.5 per cent of its "African subjects" (and it may even be a higher percentage) as "natives"

not fit for "civilisation." And this, mind you, after the "blessings" of a hundred years of Portuguese colonial rule and five hundred years of "Portuguese presence."

Yes, absurd: but for twelve million Africans in the clutches of imperial Portugal the joke can have no savour. For them the rule of Portugal stands as a savage barrier not only against any real progress in the modern world, but as a daily degradation of the most simple aspects of life. In a still wider sense, moreover, the action of the Portuguese dictatorship gives powerful and in certain ways decisive support to the whole white-supremacy structure in southern Africa. Today, more clearly than ever, and despite all the patriotic verbiage of Lisbon, the Portuguese in Africa are the mercenaries and cannon-fodder of all those up and down the world, with white South Africa at their head, who mean to "keep things as they are," and "the African in his place."

So it is worth considering how all this came about, and exactly what the Portuguese situation is today.

AN ANCIENT IMPERIALISM

The present rulers of Portugal like to say that their ancestors were the first European imperialists in Africa; and in this, at least they are telling the truth. They came a long while ago; and they came in ways they have neither forgotten nor forsaken. In 1482 they built a castle on the Gold Coast (in modern Ghana), and burnt down the village-township of the chief who tried to stop them. In 1483 they set foot in the African kingdoms of what afterwards became Angola,

and almost at once introduced the slave trade. In 1498 they sailed up the coast of East Africa, and again, almost at once, set about looting and burning the wealthy African cities that they found there: Kilwa, Mombasa, Brava and others like them. Later on, penetrating inland Mozambique along the valley of the Zambezi, they invaded and gradually wrecked other African kingdoms, including the venerable empire of the Monomotapa whose ancestors had ruled at Great Zimbabwe. For a hundred years up to 1650 they warred and ravaged across western Angola. They fastened the slave trade on enormous inland regions. They sent in settlers who seized huge estates. Even their one great service to Africa — their bringing across the Atlantic of vital American food-plants such as maize, cassave and sweet-potatoes — was a mere matter of chance and convenience. Otherwise they brought nothing in exchange for African wealth but medieval superstition, strong alcohol, and even stronger racial prejudice.

For nearly four centuries up to the 1880s they were present in Africa only as a few thousand predatory soldiers and settlers, slave-traders and administrators whose settlements and garrisons were nearly all upon the coasts of Angola and Mozambique. Many of these lived wretched lives of greed and violent competition for the spoils of the "empire." By 1800 their "centres of government" had sunk so far in decay as to have become the object of pity or contempt for all other Europeans who saw them. In 1812, for example, a British naval surgeon called James Prior landed on Mozambique Island, then the "capital" of the Portuguese in Mozambique.

He found a governor who rejoiced in the reverberating name of Dom Antonio Manuel de Mello Castro e Mendoza. But this gentleman's official residence looked "more like an old storehouse than the mansion of the first personage of the settlement. We were led to it," Prior wrote in his memoirs, "by the clashing of billiard balls and the confused clamour of contending voices, so that we at first took it to be a tavern or gambling house." All the same, Dom Antonio was said to have stowed away a fortune of some £80 000 from the profits of his job. The "empire," in short, had nothing to do with "civilisation," "trusteeship," or any other "great imperial mission": it had long since become a mere system of organised piracy for a few privileged officials, traders and settlers.

BRITAIN'S OLDEST ALLY

But things began to be different when the wild frenzies of nineteenth century imperialism spread through Western Europe in the 1880s. That was the time, as everyone knows, when Britain, France, Germany and Belgium's King Leopold led the drive for European possession of practically the whole of Africa; when missionaries and traders and explorers went into Africa to obtain "treaties of protection" from chiefs who seldom had the least idea of what they were agreeing to; when these "treaties of protection" were used by European powers to prove "effective occupation"; and when, having thus carved up the map, the soldiers followed with their Maxim guns.

Now in all this the Portuguese were badly placed. Not only were they an industrially backward people, an outstandingly poor people,

their middle-class scarcely formed and their aristocracy effete: they had also failed during the previous four centuries to secure "effective occupation" of much more than the seaboard of the vast territories they now set about claiming. Left without a powerful friend at that jackal's feast of 1884-85, when the imperialist powers met in Berlin to "agree upon boundaries in Africa," the Portuguese would have lost practically everything they claimed. The British in South Africa would have taken most of Mozambique; the Germans and the Belgians would have shared Angola; and the French would undoubtedly have seized Guinea-Bissau.

But the Portuguese rulers, happily for them, had a powerful friend at court. Ever since the fourteenth century they had had an alliance with Britain; and now Britain, seeing in the Portuguese positions in Africa a useful means of outmanoeuvring the French, the Germans and the Belgians, proceeded to protect the Portuguese. They took "little Portugal" under their wing, and, with it, the Portuguese claims in Africa. Thanks to British support, the Portuguese secured the "right" to be regarded as the possessors of the territories they are still fighting to keep.

Today, of course, things are somewhat different again. Today Portugal has other and still more powerful backers. In a military sense she is part of the structure of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, and leases to the Americans important bases on the Atlantic islands of the Azores, as well as providing the West German army with areas in Portugal for "action training" (in













partial return for which Western Germany provides hospital beds for Portuguese soldiers wounded in Portugal's colonial wars in Africa, as well as a great deal of military hardware such as jet-bombers). In a political sense Portugal is often regarded by her allies and partners as a valuable "bastion against Communism." In a commercial sense she has likewise become a profitable field for private capital investment by British, American, German, French, Swedish and other industrialists. She is no longer "alone in Africa."

But there is another and still more important sense in which Portugal is no longer "alone." She has become an integral and even decisive part of white South African ambitions, plans, and longterm policies. Both as a source of industrial wealth — in diamonds, oil, and (potentially) hydro-electric power — and as "flank defences" of the South African system of racial exploitation, Angola and Mozambique have today acquired an imperialist significance they never possessed in the past. It is no longer possible to regard these vast colonies as in any way "separate" from the whole problem and development of southern Africa. Whatever happens now in Angola and Mozambique — and so, by extension, in West African Guinea-Bissau — must be a matter of the greatest possible interest to all the peoples of the subcontinent: indeed, to all the peoples of Africa as well as to everyone, outside Africa, who stands against imperialism anywhere. The men and women who are fighting colonialism with arms in hand in Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique stand in the fore-

front of Africa's whole movement of national emancipation and struggle for equality in the modern world.

SURRENDER OR FIGHT?

If the Africans of Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique had many disadvantages in launching their movement for national emancipation — their great isolation behind the ramparts of Portuguese repression, their hard struggle for political clarity in territories where any modern ideas had still to win a foothold — they will be seen by history to have possessed at least one advantage over Africans governed by less backward powers. Since 1926, when the occasionally liberal-minded Portuguese Republic was overthrown (because it was occasionally liberal-minded) by a junta of generals who soon elected Salazar as their mentor and dictator, there has been no question of genuine reform or reformism in the Portuguese colonies. Here there could never be any illusions on the subject of an "imperial trustee" who would peacefully relinquish its political hold. Those few Africans to whom the Portuguese gave higher education had to stop being Africans, and become Portuguese. The road to reform by the promotion of "an African governing élite" was entirely barred. And so it may be said that the Portuguese colonies have at any rate been spared the waste and frustration of the kind of "stooge élite" regimes promoted in some other parts of the continent.

In this situation the pioneers of emancipation in the Portuguese colonies were faced from the very start with a clear choice between two harsh alternatives. They could surrender, give up the difficult struggle, accept pleasant jobs in Lis-

bon (which almost all of them were offered), and abandon their people. Or they could take the only other road left open to them, that of armed resistance. Nearly all of them chose the second, and this in itself is a measure of their quality as leaders of men.

They tried, of course, a third way. Before calling for the sacrifices that were bound to be imposed by armed resistance to the organised violence of the Portuguese, they had to be absolutely sure that nothing could be gained by appeals for peaceful change. They appealed to the Salazar regime for genuine reform, for step-by-step introduction of the means of African self-rule, for justice and reason, even for sensible debate. But the Salazar regime had no reply except to call out the colonial police, and, when the colonial police could not cope with the mounting tide of African resurgence, to send out from Portugal the cohorts of the PIDE, Salazar's Gestapo, and then, when even the PIDE failed to still the clamour of ordinary men and women seeking ordinary decency and justice, to send out the Portuguese army. And now, for years, the Portuguese army has bombed and burnt and shot and terrorised its way through all these countries.

But the Portuguese army has not won and is not winning its dire colonial wars. Portugal is bled to the brink of national collapse by this new imperialist effort. Forty per cent of the national budget is swallowed by its repressive forces in Africa. With a conscription period of four years, and applicable to all fit males between the ages of 18 and 45, an already impoverished Portuguese population has had to provide a colonial army which numbers today about 120 000 men from

the home country.¹ To grasp the scale of this military effort it is necessary only to compare it with the American effort in Viet-Nam. The United States has about twenty times the population of Portugal. A Portuguese army of 120 000 would be the equivalent of about 2¼ million Americans in Viet-Nam, or **five times** the number who are actually serving there.

Nor is this all. Portugal is a semi-industrialised country which makes no aeroplanes even as toys for children. But her forces in Africa are lavishly supplied with the most modern and expensive equipment by her American and European allies: with jet-bombers, military helicopters, napalm in abundant supply, frigates and other naval vessels, fast-firing cannons with all the ammunition that they need. All this they have poured on Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique in holocausts of fire and death.

And still it is not enough.

Having reluctantly chosen to fight, the Africans of these colonies have spared nothing of themselves. With an admirable heroism they have renewed the old resistances of early colonial times. They have not been discouraged. They have not given in.

They have not been defeated.

As things stand today, the military position (as I have partly verified for myself, and on the spot) is roughly as follows:

In Guinea-Bissau the PAIGC (African Party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and the Cape Verde Islands) now controls about two thirds of all the rural areas of

¹ According to sources from the patriots of the Portuguese Colonies, the number now amounts to 175 000 soldiers. (Editor's note)

that country. They have pinned down the Portuguese to about fifty fortified camps and towns, often isolating these from all Portuguese contact on the ground for weeks and even months. In May this year General Arnaldo Schultz, who had boasted that he would soon "put things in order," retired after five years of failure to do anything of the kind. He was succeeded in command by another veteran of colonial warfare, Brigadier Spinola. In June-August Brigadier Spinola ordered the evacuation of nine fortified camps and towns because they could no longer hold out against PAIGC assault. In February this year a PAIGC commando even made its way into the "capital fortress" of Bissau itself, and heavily mortared the Portuguese chief military airbase. In Guinea-Bissau, in short, the Portuguese can no longer hold their ground. The PAIGC have not yet won this war; but they are undoubtedly in the course of doing so.

In Angola the Portuguese likewise have about 40 000 troops from the home country, as well as some local African mercenaries, and are likewise heavily embattled. Seven years after armed resistance first began it is clear that the movement for Angolan emancipation is stronger than ever. A decisive moment came in 1966 when the MPLA (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola) were able to open a wide new front of armed resistance in the great inland provinces of Moxico and Cuando Cubango. Since then they have further extended their actions into the central provinces of Bié and Malange. Here they have established strong inland bases for mobile

guerrilla warfare. The cost of all this remains a bitter one, and many die, leaders as well as rank-and-file (among the leaders, for example, army commander José Montes at the head of assault troops last spring, and chief surgeon Américo Boavida under Portuguese bombing last September). Yet all the evidence — whether in the communiqués of the MPLA, in those of the Portuguese army command, or in reports by pro-Portuguese journalists from South Africa — agrees that resistance continues to grow more powerful and determined. It seems that the brave spirit of the pioneers and the leaders has spread right down the line to the people in the villages. And the history of all guerrilla wars of resistance shows that once the people in the villages become convinced of the need for war they can no longer be defeated.

In Mozambique, meanwhile, there is much the same story to be told. Formed to unify several little exile nationalist parties in 1962, FRELIMO (Front of Liberation of Mozambique) was able to grow by its own efforts, and with the good support of African allies, into a strong "inside" movement by 1964. Declaring armed resistance in September of that year, its early fighting units passed to the attack in five out of nine provinces — Cabo Delgado, Niassa, Tete, Zambesia and Moçambique — failed through lack of adequate preparation in the last three, but made good their hold in Cabo Delgado and Niassa. Since then FRELIMO has extended its political work throughout the country, and as far south as Lourenco Marques; established large liberated zones in Cabo Delgado and Niassa where its political workers have begun to build a new African

administration and economy; and strengthened its military organisation to include thousands of battle-trained fighters.

In April of this year FRELIMO went over to the attack again in the strategically delicate Tete province (site of the great projected Portuguese-South African dam and ancillary works at Cabora Bassa on the Zambezi), and was so active there in the summer of this year that the Portuguese army commander in Mozambique, according to a South African newspaper report, had transferred his own headquarters to Tete town itself. In July, again making good its claims, FRELIMO was able to hold a full-scale congress of more than 150 delegates in liberated territory inside Mozambique. I attended that congress myself, and met FRELIMO delegates who had come from the far south as well as from the provinces in the center and north and west. Here, too, the Portuguese have some 40 000 troops from the home country, as well as local African mercenaries; but here, too, they are not winning their war.

THE HARDEST TASK

Yet the inside story of these struggles against Portuguese imperialism reveals a thing that may sound hard to believe. The hardest task in building strong fighting fronts against the Portuguese was not the military effort itself. All the leaders of these movements — men such as Amilcar Cabral in Guinea-Bissau, Agostinho Neto in Angola, Eduardo Mondlane in Mozambique — have said that the hardest task lay in the long and difficult work of political preparation. Long years of painstaking political work were required before any real mil-

itary effort could be assured, or even embarked upon.

How to convince the people in the villages? How to get them even to listen to you, much less to shelter and support you? How to show them the way ahead? How to conquer their doubts and disbelief? All this needed endless talk and endless patience. All this needed a political skill and commitment that nothing could discourage. "But without that," in some words of Cabral's, "nothing of lasting value can be done. This political preparation is the toughest, most daunting, but also most important aspect of the whole campaign for national liberation."

What sort of talk and persuasion? Not, they found, about the "big things": about independence, liberation, freedom — all that would come later. But talk about "small things" — about purely local grievances, about immediate taxes, about yesterday's miseries, about today's injustices: these, they found, were the sort of things the peasants would listen to. "For the people are not fighting," again in some words of Cabral's, "for the ideas in anyone's head. They are fighting to win material benefits, to have a better life, to improve the outlook for their children."

Talking about the "small things," and then going on, afterwards, to talk about the "big things," the pioneers of national emancipation in the Portuguese colonies were able gradually to build their movements to the strength and fighting power they have today.

On any terms of measurement this has been, this is, a most remarkable achievement.