

HOW TO FIND A TIGER IN AFRICA

Searching for Agostinho Neto (17 September 1922 – 10 September 1979)

Thomas P. Wilkinson
CITCEM

What I want to do here is something very simple. I want to explain how I began to search for Agostinho Neto. I also want to explain the perspective that shapes this search.¹

When I was told about the plans for a colloquium I was asked if I would give a paper. I almost always say yes to such requests because for me a paper is the product of learning something new. So I went to the local bookstores to buy a biography of Dr Neto. The only thing I found available was a two-volume book by a man named Carlos Pacheco called *Agostinho Neto: o perfil de um ditador*, published in 2016. The subtitle of the book is “A história do MPLA em carne viva”. When I went to the university library I found another book, a collection of essays by Mr Pacheco and a book by Mr Cosme, no longer in print.²

Obviously the sheer size of Mr Pacheco’s book suggested that this was a serious study. Since these two ominous tomes were the only biography I

¹ *Monty Python’s Meaning of Life* (1983) includes an episode set in South Africa as a parody of the film *Zulu* (1964). The upshot is that an army medical officer suggests that a tiger could have bitten off the leg of a fellow officer in the night. To which all respond, “a tiger in Africa?!”. Of course tigers are indigenous to Asia but *not* Africa. Salazar was also to have attributed the indigenous opposition to Portuguese rule in Africa as “coming from Asia”. See also Felipe Ribeiro de MENESES, *Salazar: A Political Biography* (2016).

² Leonel COSME, *Agostinho Neto e o seu tempo* (2004).

could find in print in a serious bookstore, it seemed to me that the weight of the books was also designed as part of Mr Pacheco's argument. The two volumes in fact comprise digests of PIDE³ reports and Mr Pacheco's philosophical musings about politics, culture, psychology etc. There is barely anything of substance about the poet, physician, liberation leader and first president of Angola, Agostinho Neto, in nearly 1,500 pages.

As I said, I knew little about Dr Neto but I knew something about Angola and the US regime's war against the MPLA.⁴ I was also very familiar with the scholarship and research about US regime activities in Africa since 1945—both overt and covert. I also knew that dictators were not rare in Africa. However in the title of Mr Pacheco's book was the first time I had ever heard Dr Neto called a dictator. What struck me was that Dr Neto was president of Angola from the time of independence until his death in 1979—a total of four years. In contrast his successor remained president for almost 40 years. So my intuition told me if Agostinho Neto was a dictator he could not have been a very significant one. However I wanted to know what the basis of this charge was. Certainly he was not a dictator on the scale of his neighbour, Joseph Mobutu.⁵ I reasoned that Agostinho Neto was called a dictator for the same reason all heads of state are called “dictators” in the West—because he held office by virtue of processes not approved in London, Paris or Washington. In the jargon of the “West”—a euphemism for the post-WWII US Empire—anyone called a communist who becomes a head of state must be a dictator, since no one in their right mind could elect a communist and no communist would submit to an election.

However there was apparently more to this accusation than the allegation that Dr Neto must be a communist and therefore a dictator. Agostinho Neto had good relations with the Cuban “dictator” Fidel Castro and he enjoyed the

³ PIDE, *Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado*, Salazar secret political police, also trained in part by the Nazi regime's *Geheime Staatspolizei* (Gestapo).

⁴ MPLA, *Movimento popular de libertação de Angola*: Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola.

⁵ (Joseph) Mobutu Sese Seko, (1930-1997) dictator of Republic of the Congo (Zaire), today Democratic Republic of the Congo, aka Congo-Kinshasa to distinguish it from the French Congo / Congo Brazzaville, previously Congo Free State and Belgian Congo. Mobutu seized power in the wake of the overthrow and murder of Patrice Lumumba and ruled from 1965 until 1997. See Georges ZONGOLA-TALAJA, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila* (2002).

support of the Soviet Union. When there still was a Soviet Union, anyone enjoying its support, no matter how minimal or ambivalent, could be considered at least a “potential dictator”. Then I read about a brief but serious incident in 1977, an attempted military coup against the Neto government on 27 May, led by Nito Alves and José Van Dunen. The coup was defeated and all sources agree there was a purge of the MPLA and many were arrested and killed. Writers like Mr Pacheco argue that Dr Neto directed a blood bath in which as many as 20-30,000 people died over the course of two years. There appears to be agreement that many people were arrested and killed but the exact figures vary.⁶

However I still wondered whether this incident and its apparent consequences were enough to justify calling Dr Agostinho Neto, dictator of Angola.

While researching for this paper, while searching for Agostinho Neto, I found many people who had an opinion about him but very few who actually knew anything about Neto, and often they knew very little about Angola.

First I would like to deal with the coup attempt and the aftermath because that is the most immediate justification for this epithet. I am unable to introduce any data that might decide the questions I feel must be raised, but that does not make them less relevant to an accurate appraisal of Dr Neto’s four years in office.

1. How, in the midst of a civil war, and military operations to defend the country, including the capital from a foreign invader—the Republic of South Africa—are the casualties and deaths to be distinguished between police actions and military actions? What reasonably objective apparatus existed to produce the statistics upon which the count could be based?
2. What was the specific chain of command and operational structure in place to direct the purge on the scale alleged by Dr Neto’s detractors? What was the composition of the forces operating under government

⁶ Alberto Oliveira PINTO, *História de Angola* (2015); Adrien Fontaellaz, *War of Intervention in Angola* (2019).

direction during this period? What was the composition of the command at local level?

Without claiming to answer these questions—they would have to be answered by research in Angola—there are some points that make the bald assertions of those like Mr Pacheco, who claim Dr Neto is responsible for the violent aftermath, for the thousands of victims, far from proven.

Casualty reporting during war is highly unreliable even in sophisticated military bureaucracies like those of the US or Britain. There were rarely bodies to count after saturation bombing or days of artillery barrage. To add a sense of proportion, Sir Douglas Haig, commanding the British Expeditionary Force at the Somme during World War I, ordered the slaughter of nearly 20,000 British soldiers in *one day* with total casualties of some 50,000—the excuse for this was war.⁷ One's own casualties are usually a source of embarrassment. But in Angola, like in other African countries, the presence of a stable and professional bureaucracy capable of generating any kind of statistics was certainly sparse. Whether those statistics can be deemed objective is another issue.

The absence of written orders or minutes is not by itself proof that no orders were given. In fact as has been established in the research on the whole sphere of covert action, written orders can be issued “for the file” while operational orders are transmitted—deniably—by word of mouth.⁸ Then the question has to be answered in reverse: how did the actual enforcement officers receive their instructions and from whom? Here it is particularly important to note that the MPLA could not have replaced all police and other security force rank and file with personnel whose loyalty to the new Angolan government was certain. This means that many police or other security personnel had been performing under orders of the New State officers until

⁷ Jacques R. PAUWELS, *The Great Class War 1914-1918* (2018).

⁸ Ludo DE WITTE, *The Assassination of Lumumba* (2001) originally *De Moord op Lumumba* (1999). The Belgian foreign minister during the “Congo Crisis” wrote several memoranda in which the government's position was that no harm should come to Patrice Lumumba while the Belgian secret services were actively plotting his kidnapping and assassination. Historical research generally privileges documents and they survive eye-witnesses.

independence and were still on duty.⁹ The actual relationships these personnel had to the people in the districts where they were deployed would have been known, if not notorious. It is not unreasonable to infer that a general purge would give opportunities to people at all levels to solve “problems” arising from the fall of the Portuguese regime.

Then there is one other factor—a question raised by the fact that Mr Pacheco’s book relies almost entirely on PIDE reports about the MPLA. One can in fact read in several accounts of the independence struggle that the MPLA was thoroughly infiltrated by PIDE operatives. So do we know if the orders which rank and file personnel took were issued by bona fide MPLA cadre acting on instructions from the president or issued by PIDE operatives within the MPLA command structure? In fact it is a highly practiced routine of covert operations, also by the PIDE during the independence war, to appear and act as if they were the MPLA while committing acts intended to discredit it.¹⁰ While it is true that the Salazar / Caetano regime had collapsed the people who had maintained the regime—especially in covert operations—did not simply disappear. Moreover, the world’s premier covert action agency, the CIA, was an active supporter of all MPLA opposition and certainly of factions within the MPLA itself. We know about *IA Feature* because of the revelations of its operational manager, John Stockwell.¹¹ We also know that the PIDE and the CIA worked together and we know that the US ambassador to Portugal during the period (1975 to 1979) was a senior CIA officer.¹² We also know many details about the various ways in which

⁹ *Estado Novo*, the term used to designate the Portuguese regime under the dictatorial president of the council of ministers (prime minister) António Oliveira Salazar from 1932 until 1968 and then under Marcelo Caetano until April 1974.

¹⁰ This is also discussed in Fernando Cavaleiro ÂNGELO, *Os Flêchas: A Tropa Secreta da PIDE / DGS na Guerra de Angola 1969-1974* (2016) history of the PIDE’s Angolan counter-insurgency force. Since the concept and organisation of the Flêchas bears considerable resemblance to the PRU formed by the CIA in Vietnam under the Phoenix Program, it would not be surprising if CIA cooperation with the PIDE extended to “Phoenix” advice (see Valentine, 1990 p. 159 et seq.).

¹¹ John STOCKWELL, *In Search of Enemies* (1978). Stockwell had left the agency before the extensive covert support for UNITA was enhanced under Ronald Reagan, despite the Clark Amendment. However, Stockwell noted that when he had returned from Vietnam duty and before getting the paramilitary assignment for *IA Feature*, he noticed that the busiest desk at headquarters was the Portugal desk.

¹² Frank Carlucci (1930-2018), US ambassador to Portugal (1975-1978), Deputy Director of the CIA (1978-1981).

covert operations were run then.¹³ What we do not know is the extent to which it may have been involved in the coup against Dr Neto. But there is room for educated guessing.

I do not believe it is possible to reconstruct the events of the purge with evidence that can provide reasonable assurance of what responsibility Agostinho Neto bears for the deaths and casualties attributed to that period—beyond the vague responsibility which any head of state may have for actions of the government apparatus over which he presides. There are however grounds for a reasonable doubt—for a verdict at least of “not proven”.

Which brings me to my second argument: from what perspective should the brief term of Agostinho Neto as president of the Angola be examined.

First of all we must recognise that Angola prior to 1975 was a criminal enterprise.

It began with the Atlantic slave trade, which really only ended in the 1880s (although slavery did not end). Then, like in all other colonies created by Europeans, a kind of licensed banditry was practiced, euphemistically called “trade”. By the end of the 19th century most of this organised crime was controlled by cartels organised in Europe and North America.¹⁴

Why do I call this organised crime and not commerce? First of all if one uses force to compel a transaction, e.g. a gun to make someone give you something, this is generally considered a crime and in Europe and North America usually subject to punishment as such. To travel to a foreign land with a gun and compel transactions, or induce them using drugs or other fraudulent means, does not change the criminal character—only the punitive consequences.

Angola’s economy was based on stolen land, forced labour, unequal / fraudulent trading conditions, and armed force, the colour of law notwithstanding. Neither Portuguese law (nor that of any other European state) would have permitted inhabitants of Angola to come to Portugal kidnap its

¹³ Philip AGEE, *CIA Diary* and Douglas Valentine, *The Phoenix Program* (1990) and *The CIA as Organized Crime* (2017). Douglas Valentine uses the terms “stated policy” and “unstated policy” to show the importance of overt and covert language in the conduct of political and psychological warfare.

¹⁴ See Eric WILLIAMS, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) and Walter RODNEY, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1982).

youth or force its inhabitants to accept the same conditions to which all African colonies and “protectorates” were submitted.

In other words, Agostinho Neto was the first president of an Angolan state. He, together with his supporters in the MPLA, created a republic out of what was essentially a gangster economy protected by the Portuguese dictatorship in Lisbon. Does this mean that all European inhabitants of Angola were gangsters? Certainly it does not. However it can be argued that many Europeans or children of Europeans who were born in Angola recognised this when they began to demand independence, too. Some demanded independence to run their own gangs free of interference from abroad and some certainly wanted an end to gangsterism and the establishment of a government for the benefit of the inhabitants.

The performance of Dr Neto as president of Angola has to be measured by the challenges of creating a beneficial government from a system of organised crime and defending this effort against foreign and domestic armies supported by foreigners, specifically the agents of the gangsters who had been running the country until then.

But stepping back from the conditions of Angola and its plunder by cartels under protection of the New State, it is necessary to see Dr Neto’s struggle and the struggle for independence in Angola within the greater context of African independence. Like Nkrumah, Lumumba, Toure, Nasser, Qaddafi, Kenyatta, Nyerere and Cabral, what I would call the African liberation generation, Neto was convinced that Angola could not be independent without the independence of all Africa.¹⁵ In other words, he was aware that the independence from Portugal was necessarily only partial independence. Like the

¹⁵ Ghana, Congo-Kinshasa, Guinea-Conakry, Egypt, Libya, Kenya, Tanzania and Guinea Bissau, Mozambique: Nkrumah was overthrown by a military coup and forced into exile. Lumumba was deposed and murdered by a Belgian managed corporate conspiracy with US / UN support. Cabral was assassinated. Both Mondlane and Machel were murdered. Years later Qaddafi would be overthrown after massive armed attacks, tortured and murdered by US agents. The general attitude rejecting “race” and “racialism” can be found in the speeches and writings of these leaders, esp. those delivered on the occasion of independence. See also CLR JAMES, *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution* (1977) and *A History of Negro Revolt* (1985). See also Jean-Paul SARTRE, *Kolonialismus und Neokolonialismus* (1968) in particular “Der Kolonialismus ist ein System” and “Das politische Denken Patrice Lumumbas”, originally published in *Situations V Colonialisme et Neokolonialisme*.

others of this generation Neto rejected race as a basis for African independence.

The position of African liberation leaders who rigorously rejected racialised politics has often been criticised, even mocked as naïve. It has often been pointed out—accurately—that the African states were created by Europeans and hence the ethnic conflicts that have laid waste to African development are proof that these liberation leaders were wrong: that either Africa could not transcend “tribalism” or that the states created could not manage the inherited territories in a modern way.

On the contrary, the African liberation generation was well aware of the problems inherited from European gangster regimes. Moreover they understood quite well that race was created by Europeans to control them, that there was no “white man” in Africa before the European coloniser created him. The “white man” was an invention of the late 17th century. First it was a legal construct—the granting of privileges to Europeans in the colonies to distinguish and separate them from African slave labourers. Then it was elaborated into an ideology, an Enlightenment ideology—white supremacy. By uniting the colonisers, who in their respective homelands had spent the previous thirty odd years slaughtering each other for reasons of religion, ethnicity, language, and greed, the Enlightenment ideals of ethnic and religious tolerance or even liberty bound Europeans together against slave majorities. By endowing these European servants with the pedigree of “whiteness” the owners of the plantation islands could prevent them from siding with other servants—the Africans—and overthrowing the gangsters and their Caribbean drug industry. The white “identity” was fabricated to prevent class alliances against the new capitalists.¹⁶

It is not clear if the African liberation generation understood the impact of African slavery in North America. Many post-war liberation leaders have admired the US and seen in it a model for independence from colonialism. Perhaps this is because in the preparations for entering WWI, the US regime undertook a massive propaganda campaign of unparalleled success in which the history of the US was virtually re-written—or better said invented. There are numerous stories about photographs being changed in the Soviet Union

¹⁶ For a thorough elaboration of this see Gerald HORNE, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776* (2014) and *The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism* (2018).

under Stalin to remove people who had fallen from favour or been executed. There is relatively little attention devoted to the impact of the Creel Committee, a group of US advertising executives commissioned by President Woodrow Wilson to write the history people now know as “the American Dream” and to sell it throughout the world.¹⁷ This story turns a planter-mercantile slaveholder state into an “imperfect democracy” based on fine Enlightenment principles of human liberty. In fact the contemporaries of the American UDI saw the actions in Philadelphia and the insurgency that followed in the same terms that people in the 1970s saw Ian Smith and his Rhodesian National Front. It is very clear from the record that the US regime established by the richest colonials in North America was initiated to avert Britain’s abolition of slavery in its colonies. It was not an accident that African slaves and Native Americans were omitted from the protections of the new charter. On the contrary the new charter was intended to preserve their exclusion.

Which brings me to my concluding argument. I believe there are two widely misused terms in the history of the post-WWII era, especially in the histories of the national liberation struggles and so-called Third World: “Cold War” and “anti-communism”. Since the end of the Soviet Union it is even very rare that these terms are explained. The reintroduction of the term “Cold War” to designate US regime policies toward Russia is anachronistic and misleading.

To understand this we have to return to 1945. In San Francisco, California, shortly before the end of formal hostilities representatives of the Allies met and adopted what would be called the Charter of the United Nations. Among the provisions of this charter were some ideas retained from the League of Nations Covenant (which the US never ratified) and some new ideas about the future of what were called non-self-governing territories (i.e. colonies, protectorates etc.) The principle of self-determination, a legacy of the League used to carve up Austria-Hungary, Germany and the Ottoman Empire, was to be extended to all empires. After the propaganda war by which colonial troops (natives) were deployed in masses against Germany, Italy and Japan, to defend freedom and independence, it became clear that the exhausted and even more heavily indebted European colonial powers

¹⁷ George CREEL, *How We Advertised America* (1920) also discussed in Stuart EWEN, *PR: A Social History of Spin* (1996).

could not return to the *status quo ante*. Britain was incapable of controlling India and with the independence of India it would become increasingly difficult to justify or sustain rule of the rest of the empire. The Commonwealth idea basically kept the “white” dominions loyal.¹⁸ But how were the “non-whites” to be kept in line? The US regime made it clear that there would be no support for European empires of the pre-war type. So the stated policy of the Charter was that independence was inevitable—meaning that all those who wanted it had a license to get it.

At the same time however an *unstated* policy was being formulated—penned largely by George Kennan—that would form the basis for the expansion of the US Empire in the wake of European surrender. That unstated policy, summarised in the US National Security Council document—NSC 68—was based on some fundamental conclusions by the regime’s policy elite that reveal the essential problem with which all liberation movements and new independent states would be faced but could not debate. NSC 68 was promulgated in 1947 but remained secret until about 1978.

Kennan who had worked in the US mission to the Soviet Union reported confidentially that the Soviet Union, although it had won the war against Germany, was totally exhausted and would be incapable of doing anything besides rebuilding domestically, at least for another 20 years! In another assessment he pointed out that the US economy had only recovered by virtue of the enormous tax expenditure for weapons and waging WWII. It would be devastating to the US economy—in short, a massive depression would return—if the war industry did not continue to receive the same level of funding (and profit rates) it received during the war.

Furthermore, it was very clear that the US economy consumed about 60 per cent of the world’s resources for only 20 per cent of the population. Kennan argued the obvious, that this condition could not continue without the use of force by the US regime.

Although the US appears as (and certainly is) a violent society in love with its military, in fact foreign wars have never enjoyed great popularity. It

¹⁸ “Dominion” status was granted under the *Statute of Westminster 1931* to the “white colonies”: Canada, Irish Free State, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. This gave these colonies so-called responsible government based on local franchise, largely eliminating the jurisdiction of the British parliament in London.

has always been necessary for the US regime to apply extreme measures—marketing—to generate support for wars abroad. The war in Korea was initially just a continuation of US Asia-Pacific expansion (aka Manifest Destiny).¹⁹ When US forces were virtually kicked off the Korean peninsula, the machinery that had sold WWII to the masses was put in motion and the elite's hatred of the Soviet Union was relit in what became known as the McCarthy purges. The McCarthy purges were necessary to turn the Soviet Union—an ally against Hitler—into an enemy even worse than Hitler (who in fact never was an enemy of the US elite, some of whom counted the *Führer* as a personal friend²⁰). It was at this point that anti-communism became part of the arsenal for the unstated policy of the US regime. Anti-communism was enhanced as a term applicable to any kind of disloyalty—meaning failure to support the US regime in Korea or elsewhere. It also became the justification for what appeared to be contradictions between US *stated* anti-colonial policy and its *unstated* neo-colonialism.

The term “Cold War” has been attributed to US banker and diplomat Bernard Baruch and propagandist Walter Lippman. It has become accepted as the historical framework for the period from 1945 until 1989. However this is history as propaganda. The facts are that as George Kennan and other high officials knew in 1947, the Soviet Union posed absolutely no threat to the US. On the contrary the secret (unstated) policy of the US—declassified in the 1990s—was to manufacture enough atomic weaponry to attack the Soviet Union twice. Generals like MacArthur and Le May were not extremists, they simply discussed US strategy openly.²¹ The point of the “Cold

¹⁹ US war against Korea, combined with a Korean civil war, began in June 1950. A cease-fire was agreed on 27 July 1953. However the war has not officially ended and the US regime maintains at least 23,000 personnel in the country—not counting other force projection (e.g. regular manoeuvres, atomic weapons and naval power, etc.).

²⁰ Prescott Bush, father / grandfather of two US Presidents Bush, was nearly prosecuted for “trading with the enemy” due to his dealings with the Nazi regime. Henry Ford had even been awarded a decoration by the regime. These were the most notorious cases in the US. There were many other forms of less visible support to the Hitler regime from US corporations before, during and after the war. The fact is that the US did not declare war against Hitler's Germany. Hitler declared war on the US in the vain hope of bringing Japan into the war against the Soviet Union. See Jacques R. PAUWELS, *The Myth of the Good War* (2002). The US war against Japan was a continuation of its standing objectives for expansion into China—see also CUMMINGS (2009).

²¹ This argument has been made and documented in the work of Bruce CUMMINGS, *The Origins of the Korean War* (1981, 1990) and *Dominion from Sea to Sea* (2009).

War” was to create a vision, which would explain the non-existent Soviet threat as a cover for the unstated policy of US imperial expansion—against national liberation movements—while officially supporting national liberation.

Together with anti-communism, the Cold War was a propaganda / marketing strategy for undermining what every member of the African liberation generation knew intuitively, that the liberation of Africa depends not only on the liberation of every African country on the continent but on the liberation of the African diaspora. Anti-communism and the Cold War myth successfully isolated African-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans from the international struggles for liberation and human dignity and an end to racist regimes.²² In that sense anti-communism is a direct descendant of white supremacy and served the same purpose. It is particularly telling that Malcolm X, who had matured in a sectarian version of black consciousness—the Nation of Islam—was assassinated after he returned from Mecca and an extensive tour of Africa and began to argue not only that African-Americans must demand civil rights, but that they must demand human rights and that these are ultimately achieved when humans everywhere are liberated.²³ Malcolm was murdered not just for opposing white supremacy but also for being an internationalist.

If we look at the fate of the African liberation generation we will find that those who were committed internationalists and non-racialists were also socialists and did not confuse possessive individualism with human liberty. We will also find that all the leaders of newly independent African states who were most vilified, deposed or murdered were those who did not surrender those ideals or the practices needed to attain them. They were not Enlightenment leaders building on European hypocrisy. They were Romantic revolutionaries who knew that there was no salvation—only honest struggle for liberation.²⁴ I believe that Agostinho Neto was one of those Romantic revolutionaries. And the honest struggle is not over.

²² Gerald HORNE, *White Supremacy Confronted* (2019).

²³ Also formulated very clearly in his Oxford Union speech, 3 December 1964. Malcolm X was assassinated on 21 February 1965.

²⁴ For an elaboration of the term “Romantic revolutionaries” see the work of Morse PECKHAM, especially a collection of essays, *Romantic Revolutionaries* (1970).