Between 1974 and 1977 the Sociedade Agrícola do Cassequel, Angola’s most
technologically advanced and profitable sugar plantation located in Catumbela with over
five thousand employees, went from being an important asset in the financial and
industrial empire of Portugal’s Espírito Santo family to a state-owned symbol of the
promises and failures of independent Angola’s Marxist-Leninist economic plan. The
story of Cassequel’s decline, set within the tumultuous years of revolution and civil war,
are paradigmatic of the local effects of the Cold War in Angola. For the Angolans who
had relied on Cassequel for their livelihoods this change meant unemployment and
subsistence agriculture. In interviews conducted nearly thirty years after these events,
former workers all told of their excitement and anticipation for a future without
colonialism. The most common grievance against colonialism and Cassequel in
particular was low wages. A more subtle and yet universally shared complaint was best
summed up by Faustino Alfredo, who had worked for Cassequel as a relatively well paid
nurse: “colonialism was humiliation.”1 Workers, however, also spoke well of Cassequel.
They described with pride the size and efficiency of the company, just as they equated
plantation life, for all its difficulties, with elements of better times lost. One interviewee
summed it up when he said, “At least in those days we had enough to eat.”2 The
memories of those difficult times are no less complex than the geopolitical realities in
which Cassequel, Angola and the Portuguese Empire were enmeshed in those years.

“At Least in those days we had enough to eat”: Colonialism, Independence and the
Cold War in Catumbela, Angola, 1961-77
Jeremy Ball
In the short period between April 25, 1974, and May 1976, Angolans achieved a contested independence from colonial rule, war engulfed the country, US and Soviet aid fueled the fire, South African troops invaded from the south, Cuban troops arrived in a mass airlift to stop the South African invasion, and roughly a quarter million people, including most of the colony’s skilled technicians and business owners, left in the largest civilian airlift in history. The Soviet-backed MPLA [Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola] confiscated nearly all of the country’s private industry, with the important exception of oil, and declared itself the only legal political party. At Cassequel an inexperienced workers’ committee committed to the remaking of society along socialist lines, but with little practical experience of running a complex industrial enterprise, took over management.

A part of the explanation of why Angola’s transition to independence deteriorated into a fratricidal war is the fact that two revolutions were under way: one in Portugal, the other in Angola. The Armed Forces Movement that overthrew Marcelo Caetano in Portugal ushered in a period of profound change in Portuguese society. The country struggled to implement democracy after almost fifty years of dictatorship, instigated talks to end the wars in Africa, and restructured its economic system through reforms in land ownership and the nationalization of all banks headquartered in Portugal. These revolutionary changes at home, in addition to exhaustion from conducting colonial wars on three fronts, explain Portugal’s failure to ensure a peaceful handover in Angola. “The major Portuguese Government objective in Angola is to get out,” the U.S. National Security Council noted, “with honor if possible, but in any case to get out.”
Meanwhile, Portugal had made no plans, even after thirteen years of war, to prepare Angolans for independence. In fact, the conditions for independence in 1974 were disastrous. Not only did the Portuguese not have the will to ensure a peaceful transition, but three nationalist movements vied for power, claiming sole legitimacy and denying the right of any other political party to participate in government.

The primary explanation for the war, however, rests with the intervention undertaken by Cold War rivals: the United States, apartheid South Africa, and Zaire on one side, and the Soviet Union, Yugolsalvia, and Cuba on the other. Each of these foreign actors had their own specific reasons for intervening. For the United States Angola represented a test case for resisting Soviet expansion after the humiliating defeat in Vietnam. To the Soviets and Yugoslavians, Angola offered an opportunity to be seen in the Third World as a champion against Western imperialism. To Cuba, Angola offered the possibility of expanding the peoples’ revolution of which it saw itself as the vanguard. For South Africa and Zaire a communist Angola threatened the status quo in southern Africa. Cold War politics acted as the major catalyst in the decision of each country to intervene in what was essentially a domestic dispute among rival nationalist movements.

Caught somewhere in the midst of this chaotic and deteriorating situation were the Portuguese owners and the Angolan employees of the Sociedade Agrícola do Cassequel. The events of the years 1974-1977 transformed Cassequel and the people whose lives revolved around it. Decisions made by foreign powers and their Angolan clients rewarded extremism and destroyed the fragile middle ground of compromise. As we shall see below, their story is a prime example of the local effects of Cold War
diplomacy, because when the superpower rivalry came to Catumbela, lives would never again be the same.

*Background: Labor Conditions Before 1974*

To understand the Cold War story of Catumbela’s workers and residents, one must begin well before the rise of superpower tensions. Angola has the dubious distinction of having been a major source for the Atlantic slave trade. Slavery and forced labor did not, however, end with abolition in the late nineteenth century. Portuguese officials participated in a slave trade to the cocoa-producing islands of São Tomé and Príncipe in the Gulf of Guinea as late as 1908, and forced labor continued as a reality for Angolans until the 1950s. In 1930 Portugal (along with France and Belgium) refused to ratify the Forced Labor Convention of 1930, as officials from Lisbon argued that Portuguese legislation (which allowed for forced labor) “better serves our needs.” As a result of international and domestic pressure, Portugal ratified the Forced Labor Convention only in 1959, literally on the eve of independence for most of Africa.

Forced labor had therefore been a reality at Cassequel for much of its history. Company administrators requested workers from colonial officials, known as *chefes de posto*, in the interior. These *chefes de posto* then demanded from local African chiefs a particular number of men to become contract workers, known as *contratados*. *Contratados* were then delivered to individual employers such as Cassequel for periods ranging from six to twenty-four months. *Contratados* could not legally break their “contract.” The only way for a *contratado* to terminate his contract—*contratados* were all male—was to run-away from Cassequel, though this dangerous decision carried
important economic consequences. A run-away, *fugido* in Company statistics, forfeited the bulk of his earned salary because this could only be collected from the *chefe de posto* responsible for “recruitment” at the end of the contract. Despite these substantial risks, hundreds of forced laborers ran away from Cassequel every year until the late 1950s. Rates of desertion were higher among men “recruited” in administrative posts within a hundred kilometers from the plantation. Surely then, life at Cassequel, for the workers at least, was no picnic.

Forced labor at Cassequel was phased out during the 1950s as a result of pressures from Portuguese officials, increasing competition for African laborers and the resulting scarcity of labor in Angola. A 1955 letter from the president of Cassequel’s board of directors, Manuel Espírito Santo, to the plantation’s administration in Angola, spelled out the new policy:

> The labor problem is without a doubt of maximum importance for our business…the most desirable solution to the labor problem would be a voluntary work force, not only at present, but principally in the future given the native labor policy that the Governor General of the province [Angola] plans to follow.  

The end of forced labor and improved labor conditions aimed at attracting voluntary workers, led to slightly higher salaries, a new hospital and better health care. Further, incentives, such as clothes, were distributed to workers who completed a longer contract, and the abolition of corporal punishment as a means of disciplining workers, improved the work experience of Cassequel’s roughly five thousand African employees.

Still, by 1960 an end to forced labor within the context of continued Portuguese colonial rule seemed too little, too late to many, if not most, Angolans. The scars of colonial oppression, perceived so often as national humiliation, were simply too deep to be healed by new clothes or higher wages. The slide into civil war and UN intervention
in neighboring Congo in 1960 fueled Portuguese determination to buck the trend of African independence and convinced Angolan nationalists that the forces of imperialism and neo-colonialism would stop at nothing to hold on to control over Africa’s resources. Meanwhile Cassequel distributed weapons to its Portuguese employees, who made nightly patrols of the plantation’s perimeters. These patrols continued after the beginning of the nationalist revolt in northern Angola in March 1961.

It was in the context of revolt in Angola and independence across Africa, that the International Labor Organization (ILO) decided to investigate charges made against Portugal under the terms of the Forced Labor Convention, which Portugal signed in 1959. A three-member mission visited Cassequel in December 1961 and reported that the unskilled workers at Cassequel “gave the impression of being intimidated.” The ILO commission went on to criticize Portugal for a status quo in Angola marked by “…social and cultural backwardness in which for many people freedom and compulsion are equally impalpable.” The ILO’s assessment of conditions at Cassequel must be understood against the backdrop of an aggressive campaign by the Government of Portugal to promote the idea of *lusotropicalismo*, which opined that Portuguese colonialism was inherently different than the British and French versions of colonial rule because the Portuguese did not practice a color bar, and further Portuguese men willingly intermarried with native women, whether in Africa, Brazil, or Asia.

The web of power relations at Cassequel must have been in ILO commissioners’ minds when they viewed photographs displayed proudly by the plantation’s administrators showing a recent celebration marking the completion of contracts for recruited workers. Recruited workers lived and worked in *guias*, or work gangs, based
on the administrative district at which they were recruited. For example, the Chinguar
*guia* banner [Illustration A] proclaims, “Long live our employer Cassequel; Long live all
our bosses; long live St. Peter hospital; my homeland is Angola; Angola is a part of
Portugal, hence I am from Portugal; my fatherland is Portugal; long live President Tomáz
[of Portugal].”

**Illustration A: Chinguar Guia**

![Chinguar Guia Banner](source)

Source: Photographs, Cassequel Archive.

The date on the banner, 5 May 1961, is significant because the nationalist revolt
in northern Angola began in March 1961. Thus, we may interpret the banner as a
reaction to African nationalism from Cassequel’s Portuguese administrators. In January
 Manuel Espírito Santo, head of the board of directors of both the Espírito Santo Bank and Cassequel, reflected on the previous year to shareholders:

For all of us Portuguese 1961 was a year of suffering and sacrifice that will be engraved in the memories of those who lived through it, and remembered in our history as a year of great trial, which we confronted with serenity and a firm determination to defend the principles of western civilization.\textsuperscript{11}

In the context of increasing pressure on Portugal to decolonize and in response to Prime Minister Salazar’s insistence that the “overseas provinces” [including Angola] made up an integral part of Portugal, Cassequel’s board of directors implemented a series of reforms, including the abolition of force labor, an end to corporal punishment, and improved housing and health care for workers. The reforms aimed to defuse international criticism of Portuguese colonial rule and to secure a voluntary workforce. They were, in this sense, made with one eye on the international scene, another fixed firmly closer to home. As a result of these reforms, by 1970, according to a subsequent ILO investigation, contract labor in Angola did not involve coercion.\textsuperscript{12}

The reforms did not, however, address one of the most common complaints among Cassequel’s African workers–low wages. Between 1965 and 1974, for example, a “non-specialized” worker–a category that included 5,715 out of 5,983 workers in 1965–earned a monthly salary of between 225 and 400 escudos, roughly $8-$15, plus a food allowance and housing.\textsuperscript{13} Skilled employees such as Faustino Alfredo, who worked as a nurse at Cassequel’s St. Peter hospital, earned over 1000 escudos, or $37, per month, which was considered a decent wage, though still only 40 percent of the lowest paid Portuguese employee.\textsuperscript{14} But skilled African employees were a small minority, roughly four percent of the work force.
Throughout the 1960’s the Portuguese armed forces contained the nationalist war to Angola’s sparsely populated eastern districts. Due to this relative calm and the lack of forceful Western criticism of Portuguese colonialism as a result of Cold War calculations, many among the Portuguese elite believed it possible to hold on to Angola. Among the most important of these Cold War calculations were Portugal’s role in NATO and the US air base in the Portuguese Azores. Among the staunchest supporters of continued Portuguese rule in Angola were the owners of the largest financial-industrial conglomerates in Portugal, including the Espírito Santo family. In 1969 the Companhia União Fabril (CUF), which controlled more than 100 businesses worth one-tenth of the capital of all existing Portuguese firms, hired the US-based Hudson Institute to conduct a survey of Angola’s prospects for development. CUF held extensive Angolan investments in banking, mining, and construction. The Hudson Institute recommended to CUF, and later at a conference in Portugal attended by Manuel Espírito Santo, a “go for broke” strategy of massive investment:

This choice is to push development of Angola at high speed on all fronts with the objective being to make Angola the model African state in terms of industry, social development, employment, education and bi-racial or multi-racial harmony. This choice is a bet on the validity of the work done since 1961 and the relationships of the racial communities throughout the history of Angola. The basis for such a choice is current fact (i.e. no war, no hunger, no hostility) when compared to other African states. In this case Portugal states that premature withdrawal is irresponsible as it is a way of turning people over to control by small cliques. Instead a new plan focusing on all aspects of Angola to make a modern 20th century state with education and opportunity for all and minimum standards of living would be announced having as its objective the provision of western European standards as soon as possible and programming a referendum in the Year 2000 for future political development of Angola. Angola is sufficiently rich in human and natural resources to undertake such a program.
In the early 1970’s the Espírito Santo family made substantial investments in Angola, including the creation in 1973 of the Inter Unido Bank with the First National City Bank of New York (City Bank). Large investments by Portugal’s leading conglomerates reflected the conviction among Portugal’s ruling elite that it would be possible to hold on to Angola in spite of the nationalist war for independence. This hope was not quixotic. As long as the dictatorship held firm, and Portugal continued to work with the National Party Government of South Africa, and Ian Smith’s illegal regime in Rhodesia, white hegemony in Southern Africa appeared strong. In addition, the Portuguese elite could count on acquiescence from leading Western powers concerned about keeping southern Africa, and its minerals, away from the Soviets.

Revolution

The peaceful revolution begun on April 25, 1974, that toppled Marcelo Caetano and over forty years of dictatorship in Portugal, led to Cassequel’s first labor strikes in June and August 1974. Cassequel’s workers, including a few Portuguese employees, elected a workers’ committee [comité de trabalhadores] to represent their collective interests in talks with management. After those negotiations failed to secure a rise in salary, the workers’ committee collaborated with the hitherto white and mestiço Lobito Employees Union of Commerce and Industry to organize workers. The vast majority of Cassequel workers subsequently walked off their jobs and demanded higher salaries. This was a first in Cassequel’s sixty-year history. Never before had African workers protested or openly challenged company policies, even during thirteen years of nationalist war against colonialism. Taking a hard-line response, Cassequel’s administration refused
to raise salaries, arguing that without a raise in the fixed government price paid for Cassequel sugar the company could not afford higher salaries. The workers maintained solidarity and at one point during the strike surrounded the company offices and refused to allow the director out of the offices. He managed eventually to extricate himself, but only after agreeing to raise salaries. Meanwhile Cassequel lobbied the new revolutionary government in Lisbon for a raise in the set price of sugar.

The Portuguese revolution opened a flood-gate of pent up anger and frustration against colonialism during a period of heightened Cold War tension. Union literature of the period reflects a growing sense of strength, as well as an increasingly anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist sentiment. For example, in a public statement dated June 22, 1974, the Lobito Employees Union of Commerce and Industry called on Cassequel workers to maintain unity and wait for instructions from their union, in order “to prosecute our fight and defeat one of the principle methods of Capitalist repression: hunger.” The company agreed to raise base monthly salaries to 3500 escudos—approximately a ten-fold increase. For workers, the drastic jump in salary validated collective action and the promises of socialism. For the bottom line of the company, however, the ten-fold jump in salaries, added to weeks of lost production translated into substantial financial losses in 1974, even with a rise in the price of sugar. The August strike caused a deficit of nineteen million escudos, or roughly $700,000, for the company, roughly the same amount as its reported profits in 1973.

The 1974 strike invigorated the burgeoning union movement and gave workers a taste of their own strength in a rapidly changing situation. Initially workers demanded modest gains such as the right to strike, a forty-hour week, and a minimum wage.
During 1975, anti-capitalist/anti-imperialist rhetoric escalated as the political situation deteriorated. Imperialism and capitalism became—along with colonialism—the enemies of “the People.”

It is here, in 1975 then, that the story of Cassequel becomes fundamentally a Cold War tale. In January 1975 Portugal signed the historic Alvor agreement with the three Angolan nationalist movements, the Soviet-backed MPLA, the US-backed FNLA [National Front for the Liberation of Angola] and South African-backed UNITA [National Union for the Total Independence of Angola], to establish a transitional government made up of the three nationalist movements and the Portuguese, which would govern until November 11, 1975, when Portugal would hand over power to the Angolans. Within six weeks of the agreement, however, the FNLA attacked MPLA troops in northern Angola and the situation quickly deteriorated into a renewed state of war with the Portuguese wringing their hands and the transitional government defunct. The FNLA’s aggressive posture reflected its military advantage as a result of substantial financial and logistical support from Zairean leader Mobutu Sese Seko. The FNLA figured that if it could capture Luanda, then it would be in the strongest position to take over political power on 11 November, Independence Day. As the violence escalated, the FNLA and MPLA engaged in a “discourse of exclusion,” which denied any legitimacy to the other nationalist movement, or indeed to any political movement except their own.21 Another contributory factor to the escalating violence was that neither superpower acted to ensure the Alvor agreement, and, in fact, additional foreign military funding began almost immediately.
In January 1975, the MPLA and FNLA were both actively soliciting funds from their international supporters. The US acted first, a week after the signing of the Alvor agreement, when the Forty Committee, the top-level review board that passes on covert operations abroad, approved a $300,000 program of covert support for FNLA leader, Holden Roberto. MPLA leaders were meanwhile soliciting funds from Yugoslavia, the USSR, and Cuba. Specifically, the MPLA requested $100,000 to cover the cost of shipping of its major arsenal from Dar-es-Salaam to Angola. Soviet and Cuban aid would not, however, begin until July, and it was Yugoslavia that stepped forward to provide the requested $100,000.

Meanwhile the workers’ movement equated the end of colonial rule and imperialist domination as the harbingers of a more just workers’ state. The MPLA in particular encouraged workers to discuss their problems, to know their rights, and not to tolerate “criminal exploitation” at the hands of the capitalists and imperialists in Angola. In its official newspaper, Vitória Certa (Certain Victory) the MPLA labeled the increasingly ineffectual Transitional Government, of which it was a member, as imperialist. When business owners threatened closures due to increasing labor costs the MPLA labeled the threats “reactionary manipulation.”

At Cassequel and in the adjacent town of Catumbela the sporadic violence between supporters of the three nationalist movements disrupted the 1974-75 sugar harvest as Portuguese technicians and management began a mass exodus. To further confuse the situation, the Government of Portugal issued a warrant for the arrest of the president of Cassequel’s board of directors, António Espírito Santo, who then fled Angola for South Africa with the help of Jonas Savimbi, leader of UNITA, rather than...
face extradition to Portugal where his family was being charged for collusion with the Salazar and Caetano regimes. António Espírito Santo negotiated the wage increases with workers in August 1974 and was trying desperately to establish a modus operandi with the nationalist movements in order to hold on to his family’s Angolan investments. In March 1975, as fighting escalated, the Espírito Santos decided to support Jonas Savimbi’s UNITA. The decision reflected the fact that UNITA was the most pro-business nationalist movement. According to António Espírito Santo’s younger brother, “UNITA was the most non-communist party in Angola and our hope was that they would allow the private companies to continue.”

In April 1975, for example, when the transitional government nationalized Angola’s private banks, UNITA issued the following statement: “We wish to take an unequivocal stand; UNITA does not support the nationalization because in addition to creating stagnation in our economy…it creates fear on the part of investors and encourages and facilitates capital flight.”

Statements such as this one delighted UNITA’s supporters among Angola’s business leaders, as well as, its South African, and soon to be American, supporters.

In March 1975 Victor Ribeiro, an Angolan-born mestiço [a person of mixed European and African heritage], MPLA supporter, engineer in Cassequel’s sugar factory, and member of Cassequel’s workers’ committee, assumed the position of plantation director. In March 1975 Ribeiro represented the modus operandi with independent Angola being attempted by the Espírito Santos. With António Espírito Santo in South Africa, Victor Ribeiro attempted to run the plantation, in spite of heightened tension and sporadic fighting among supporters of MPLA and UNITA. Company employees carried membership cards for both nationalist movements in case of roadblocks. Both MPLA
and UNITA armed civilians and fought for control of Catumbela. Meanwhile Cassequel’s administrators admonished workers to keep working because “everything will be good after independence.” In response to this promise the MPLA declared:

This is a huge lie…the Angolan people are interested in instituting in our country a Democratic Popular Regime under the control of the working class, aligned with the peasants and all other exploited classes of our people. On the other hand, other Angolans are interested in instituting a fascist regime that will terminate all the democratic victories already won by the People. These are the ones who protect the bosses and threaten the workers and the Angolan people. These bandits ought to be unmasked.

The fight will only be finished when exploitation ends and the People achieve economic and political power. But in order for us to achieve economic and political power, we have to pull down the State of Exploiters and construct a State of the People.

As a result of the nationalist propaganda workers “did not,” according to former worker Daniel Sowende Fiqueiredo, “want to work any longer, they thought that independence would provide everything for free.” Another former worker, Germano Castrioto, said that workers just wanted “to do nothing and drink quimbombo,” a kind of locally brewed palm wine. Labor productivity plummeted at Cassequel and across Angola. As the American Consul explained, productivity simply was not on the minds of most Angolans during this period of upheaval: “For the African workers the end of colonialism signifies above all else the welcome demise of the white foreman’s efforts to push the production pace.”

Amidst the heightened rhetoric and on-going battles for control of Catumebla, Cassequel found it nearly impossible to recruit workers in the UNITA-controlled interior highlands because of the general uncertainty and violence. Workers were split between support for MPLA and UNITA. In Catumbela it was UNITA’s union, SINDACO, which commanded the loyalty of most workers in 1975. Support for UNITA also stemmed
from ethnic identification. Former UNITA soldier Sousa Jamba explains, “As Ovimbundu…we believed that this was the only movement that would assert our position in the country and save us from *mestiço* [MPLA] domination.” As supporters of UNITA and MPLA competed for the loyalty of Cassequel’s workers, the Portuguese Government, which by July 1975 controlled little more than Angola’s main cities, announced plans to evacuate by air 250,000 people, including nearly all of the country’s skilled work-force and most business owners. In this vacuum of authority and increasing uncertainty, battles between the nationalist movements continued.

Instability also fueled ideological rhetoric. As late as May 1975, MPLA President Agostinho Neto told the American Consul in Luanda that he was not a Marxist and preferred to call himself “…a Progressive who takes a pragmatic approach to problems.” Neto also explained that “the MPLA is not so anti-American that it cannot see and adapt to reality,” and that that the MPLA “wants relations with the United States and will cooperate as long as Angola’s sovereignty and its right to make decisions based on its perceptions of its national interests are respected.”

It is in July that the major escalation from foreign supporters began in the context of the dissolution of the transitional government and an escalation of violence and of violent rhetoric. On July 17, the Ford Administration approved a CIA Action Plan, dubbed IAFEATUR, to increase aid to FNLA and to begin funding UNITA. On July 18 President Ford authorized the disbursement of $6 million, followed by another $8 million on July 27, and $10.7 million on August 20. US Secretary of State Kissinger explained the US decision to intervene:

Leaving the field to Soviet military operations would doom us to irrelevance in the upheavals in Southern Africa looming on the horizon and probably in
other regions as well. The issue, in short, was not the intrinsic importance of Angola but the implications for Soviet foreign policy and long term East-West relations.  

That same month South Africa began covertly supplying UNITA with weapons. The South African decision to supply UNITA stemmed from UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi’s solicitations for help to fight the MPLA and South African fears that an MPLA government in Luanda would provide succor to the South West Peoples’ Organization (SWAPO), which was fighting the South African occupation of Namibia. Nathaniel Davis, US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, reported in July that Savimbi “was soliciting arms everywhere.”

Cuban intervention began in earnest just as the Forty Committee approved covert funds. On July 25, Cuban representatives arrived in Angola with $100,000 and plans to begin sending Cuban military instructors. The first Soviet weapons began arriving in August. Still, at a meeting with Cuban representative Raúl Díaz Argüelles on 11 August 1975, MPLA President Agostinho Neto complained about the paucity of support [for the MPLA] from the socialist countries, especially in comparison to Mobutu’s support for the FNLA.

By August 1975 the Revolutionary Council running Portugal recognized that Angola was operating without a government, and “ineffectiveness, incompetence, and corruption” marked what government still existed. A week later the MPLA took effective control of the Catumbela area and work at Cassequel ground to a standstill. According to Catarina Rodrigues Silva, a secretary at Cassequel, Victor Ribeiro, the former engineer and workers’ committee member, entered Catumbela “on an MPLA tank.” Whether or not Mr. Ribeiro actually rode into town on a tank it is impossible to
determine, though perhaps this is beside the point; the memory represents the impression that Mr. Ribeiro decided to work with the MPLA against his former employers.

Meanwhile, work at Cassequel ground to a near standstill. This was due in part to a scarcity of specie with which to pay workers. In April 1975 private banks in Portugal were nationalized. In Angola, ownership of private banks was transferred to the Transitional Angolan Government. In August the Ministry of Finance imposed strict restrictions on bank account withdrawals in order to avert the run on banks that had begun at several locations, including Lobito, near Cassequel. Thus, money was tightly rationed, and most of Cassequel’s administrators, including accountants, had left the country or were busy making arrangements to leave.

War and Independence

From August the military situation continued to escalate as foreign aid and military trainers arrived in Angola. It was in October, however, that the situation changed dramatically. On October 14 a South African military column, code-named Zulu, invaded from the south. The invasion sparked the second, more intense stage of the Angola war. Zulu was composed of more than 1,000 black Angolans and a smaller number of white South African troops. The Angolan troops included FNLA guerrillas and soldiers who had fought with the Portuguese during the war for independence. The aim of Zulu was to take Luanda and turn it over to what by this point in the war had become the FNLA-UNITA alliance. Zulu moved quickly, taking Catumbela on November 1, and continuing up the coast towards Luanda. It was in response to this invasion that Cuba launched Operation Carlota to stop the South Africans. Carlota
included a 652-man battalion of the elite Special Forces of the Ministry of the Interior, flown to Luanda on November 7. A larger artillery regiment consisting of 1,253 men traveled by sea and arrived in Angola between November 27 and December 1. Castro acted without the consent of Moscow and only informed the Soviets after the fact.\(^{47}\) The Cuban soldiers stopped the South African-FNLA-UNITA advance. On the eve of independence the South African-FNLA-UNITA forces controlled about two-thirds of the country, including Catumbela, but the Cuban-MPLA forces held the capital.

On November 11, amidst civil war, the Portuguese High Commissioner lowered the Portuguese flag and left Angola without transferring power to a nationalist administration. The MPLA, which controlled Luanda, proclaimed “a people’s republic” and was immediately recognized by the Eastern Bloc and socialist countries, but not Portugal. FNLA and UNITA announced the formation of a “national revolutionary council” based in their central highlands stronghold. The war continued throughout November and December. The South Africa-FNLA-UNITA alliance increasingly lost ground as Cubans built up their forces.

The final blow to the South African-FNLA-UNITA alliance came when on December 19, 1975, the United States Senate passed the Tunney Amendment, banning any use of funds for Angola.\(^{48}\) This meant the end of the US covert program in Angola. The Tunney Amendment reflected Americans’ unwillingness, after Vietnam, to become embroiled in another war, in a part of the world most viewed as peripheral to US interests. The Tunney Amendment also reflected Congress’s determination to exercise its constitutional war-making authority. After the passage of the Tunney Amendment the Soviet airlift of weapons and supplies accelerated. On December 30 South Africa
decided to withdraw Zulu. The last South African troops left Angolan territory on March 27, 1976. The main reason for the abrupt South African decision was the withdrawal of US support. President Ford blamed the Senate for jeopardizing America’s position in the world, “This abdication of responsibility by a majority of the Senate will have the gravest consequences for the long-term position of the United States and for international order in general.”

Remaking Angolan Society

The MPLA victory in February and March 1976 cleared the way for the remaking of Angolan society along socialist lines. The South African invasion and the decisive aid supplied by Cuba and the USSR, moved the MPLA to adopt a Soviet-style system. On Independence Day, Agostinho Neto declared that “the organs of the state will be under the supreme guidance of the MPLA and the primacy of the movement’s structures over those of the state will be ensured.” The MPLA declared itself the only legal representative of the Angolan people, and guaranteed democracy through participation in the MPLA’s “peoples’ power” movement. In fact, the institutions of the MPLA and the government became one in the same. According to Article 31 of the 1975 Constitution, “The President of the Popular Republic of Angola is the President of the MPLA.” This new order allowed no room for dissenters. The FNLA and UNITA were declared “traitors” of the Angolan people and became enemies of the MPLA’s self-proclaimed “true cause” against which opposition had no legitimate place.

At Cassequel the remaining workers greeted independence with high expectations and great enthusiasm. Germano Adelino Castrioto, a former cane cutter, remembered the
days following independence: “at first it was sweet, it was good because we still had many things that colonialism left behind, later it came to an end.”

According to Sócrates Dáskalos, governor of Benguela Province during the Transitional Government and then again after the MPLA took control of the province from the South African-FNLA-UNITA alliance in February, the MPLA victory emboldened the most radical empelistas (MPLA stalwarts) to demand the confiscation of anything “that smelled of profit or privilege.” On May 8 the MPLA confiscated Cassequel. The legislation provided four justifications for the confiscation: 1) sugar production was strategic for the national economy; 2) the company employed over 4,000 workers; 3) the administration of the company abandoned the country and cooperated with the “reactionary conspiracy” led by FNLA and UNITA; and 4) the company had a monopoly of the nation’s sugar production. The confiscation reflected as well the fact that the Espírito Santos fought on the losing side of the war.

The confiscated Cassequel fell under the authority of the Ministry for Industry and Energy, which set up a National Commission for Restructuring the Sugar Industry, made up of MPLA party officials and several Cuban advisors. The National Commission even changed Cassequel’s name to Primeiro de Maio (The First of May) in honor of International Workers’ Day and asked Victor Ribeiro to remain as director. Ribeiro worked with MPLA-aligned union representatives to discuss policy and work-related issues. The local union [comissão sindical] replaced the former worker committees after May 1976 as the primary structure through which workers could voice their concerns and discuss issues. In addition, the local MPLA party cell [Comité de Acção] also participated in local issues, including the day-to-day operations of Cassequel/Primeiro de
Maio. The most ideological members of the union and MPLA party cell demanded that
the administration be “sanitized” of the remaining Portuguese engineers. Ribeiro
managed to safeguard the jobs of these engineers, but agreed to reduce their salaries by
fifty percent. He recognized that these engineers operated the sugar mill and without
their expertise the machinery would eventually cease to function. With half their former
salaries during a period of high inflation, however, and in a period of overt ideological
strife, the engineers decided almost to a man to leave Angola. Concurrent with the
sanitizing of “colonialists,” the National Commission for Restructuring the Sugar
Industry sent two-dozen Cubans to help the Angolans now running the sugar processing
equipment. Cold War battles thus continued to influence and alter life on the plantation
even after the formal close of hostilities.

Daily life in Catumbela became more difficult throughout 1976. Diminishing
stocks of staple foods, as a result of the deterioration of networks of distribution and the
absence of a reliable currency, led to increasingly expensive food prices and negated the
wage gains workers achieved in 1974. The results were practically catastrophic.
Generally, Cassequeul workers and their families were unable to obtain either consumer
goods formerly bought in Portuguese-owned stores in Catumbela or food formerly
supplied by farmers in the interior.

Facing these challenges, the revolutionary regime declared 1976 a period of
National Reconstruction. Initially, workers hopeful for a better life in the future
welcomed the structural changes and contributed their labor in spite of the erratic
payment of salaries and high inflation. In this context more and more workers stole sugar
cane and company equipment; others converted parts of the plantation into subsistence
garden plots. According to the provincial governor, the source of the problem was policies made by the National Commission for Restructuring the Sugar Industry: “During that period (1976-77) Cuban cooperation could not be criticized without running the risk of being accused as a counter-revolutionary, and in the sugar industry the Cuban presence was numerous.” He even charged that the Cubans wanted to see the Angolan sugar industry fail so that Cuba could sell sugar to Angola. Geopolitics continued, therefore, to play havoc with daily life in Catumbela.

The changes at Cassequel had significant effects not only for the plantation’s owners but also, perhaps not surprisingly, for its workers as well. By the end of 1976, which the MPLA had declared “the year of national reconstruction,” workers at Cassequel harvested less than forty percent of the 1973 crop. In spite of proud declarations at the Second National Conference of Angolan Workers in December 1976 celebrating the Angolan peoples’ victory over “American imperialism,” “maoists,” “racist South Africans,” and “certain African government who have sold out to imperialism,” 1976 proved a difficult year for the workers and their families who depended on Cassequel. Still, Angolans continued to hope that socialism would, as the national workers’ union promised, “assure Angola a full independence, social progress, happiness, and well-being for all.”

Declining sugar production, the theft of company property, and worker unhappiness over high inflation and the erratic payment of salaries, brought Lopo do Nascimento, one of the most prominent MPLA leaders, to Cassequel in 1977. Lopo do Nascimento urged workers to produce for the good of the revolution because: “Increased production advances the revolution.” He also praised Cuban comrades supplying
decisive aid in the sugar industry. President Neto also urged the workers to produce. In spite of encouraging words and revolutionary propaganda, the workers who stayed on the plantation increasingly turned to subsistence plots in order to feed themselves. Without sufficient numbers of engineers and mechanics, equipment deteriorated. According to stories told to the author in 2001 in Lisbon, Cuban officials even took Cassequeal’s tractors as payment for previous and ongoing debts, thus further adding to the slow down in production.

In 1977, Fidel Castro reported to East German leader, Erich Honecker, that the Angolan sugar plantations were back in production and that “things are going well in Angola. They achieved good progress in their first year of independence.” In the same year Victor Ribeiro resigned in protest to directives from the National Commission for Restructuring the Sugar Industry. In spite of Castro’s report, production at Cassequel continued to decline until the government shut the plantation down completely in the mid-1980s.

Conclusion

Cassequeal’s demise resulted from a combination of the MPLA’s hard-line ideology of economic transformation, the disillusionment and departure of the plantation’s skilled technicians and management, and the unstable economic climate in Angola, and mismanagement by the National Commission for Restructuring the Sugar Industry.

Fueling the MPLA’s hard-line policies was the intervention in Angola by Cold War foes. Rather than supporting the forces of moderation and compromise—excluding
members of all three liberation movements, the business community, and even the Portuguese military acting in its capacity as guarantor of the transition to independence—the United States, the Soviet Union, Cuba, South Africa, Zaire, and Yugoslavia empowered the extreme ideologues of each movement and destroyed the chances for a negotiated settlement. Each foreign power intervened for its own self-interest. One striking component of these interventions is the disregard for the best interests of the Angolan people. As US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger wrote, “The issue, in short, was not the intrinsic importance of Angola….”

At Cassequel the consequences of the Cold War intervention in Angola have been devastating. The hard-line, socialist, Soviet-aligned policies of the MPLA produced a few early benefits for workers, such as higher wages, but ultimately the vilification of the former owners and skilled technicians resulted in lower production and the eventual closure of the plantation. In 2001 tens of thousands of Angolans grew subsistence agriculture on the former sugar plantation, managing to eke out a living as best they could. Social services, such as health care, were virtually non-existent, and many remembered the last decade of the colonial era as a period of relative abundance.

1 Interview with Faustino Alfredo, Catumbela, 5 July 2001.
5 “Confidential letter to the Conselho Superior das Colonias, Sobre o Relatorio de 17 de Junho da Presidencia da Delegacao Portuguesa a Sessao da Conferencia Internacional do Trabalho,” Gabinete do Ministro, Sala 6, Maço 2878, Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, p. 6.


Ibid., p. 245.


Ball, “‘The Colossal Lie’”, p. 167.


Ibid.

Ibid.

UNTA, “Camaradas Vigilancia contra as Manobras Reaccionarias,” May 1975, A-T/S I-24, CIDAC.


Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, p. 250.

Ibid.

See, for example, “A Luta dos Trabalhadores contra o Imperialismo,” in *Vitória Certa*, 12 July 1975, p. 4.

Ibid., p. 4.

Interview with José Manuel Pinheiro Espírito Santo, 30 August 2002, Lisbon.


“A Luta dos Trabalhadores contra o Imperialismo,” *Vitória Certa*, July 12, 1975, p. 4.

Ibid.

Interview with Daniel Sowende Fiqueiredo, 4 July 2001, Catumbela.

Interview with Germano Castrioto, 16 July 2001, Catumbela.


Ibid.

Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, p. 293.


Ibid., p. 294.

Davis, “The Angolan Decision of 1975,” p. 111. Davis resigned in protest to President Ford’s decision to provide covert assistance to the FNLA and UNITA on July 18, 1975.


Interview with Catarina Rodrigues Silva, Lisbon, 29 August 2002.

Gleijeses, p. 301.

Ibid., p. 307.

Kissinger, p. 832. In June 1976, the Clark Amendment made the Tunney Amendment permanent (until it was in turn repealed by the Reagan Administration in 1985).

President Gerald Ford quoted in Kissinger, p. 832.


Interview with Germano Adelino Castrioto, 11 July 2001, Catumbela.


Law n.º 3/76, 3 March 1976, Diário da República, 1 Série, No. 52.


Interview with Germano Adelino Castrioto, Catumbela, 11 July 2000.

Dáskalos, Um Testemunho para a História de Angola, pp. 210-211.

Ibid., p. 211.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Interview with Germano Adelino Castrioto, Catumbela, 11 July 2000.


Dáskalos, Um Testemunho para a História de Angola, p. 211.

Kissinger, p. 810.