



Article REVIEW

(including a **Response** from *the article author*)

Norrie MacQueen. “Belated Decolonization and UN Politics Against the Backdrop of the Cold War.” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 8:4 (Fall 2006).

Reviewed by **Elaine Windrich**, Stanford University
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These comments are intended more as a supplement to Norrie MacQueen’s paper on the international response to Guinea-Bissau’s “Proclamation of Independence” rather than a criticism of it. For this reviewer is generally in agreement with the contents and would differ, if at all, only on matters of emphasis or inclusion, which in any case depend upon the interests and preferences of the author.

Although Guinea-Bissau was, as MacQueen points out, Portugal’s most “dispensable” African colony (with only half a million people and no significant economic resources), its declaration of independence on the eve of the UN General Assembly meeting in 1973 again raised the question of Portugal’s obligations to comply with United Nations resolutions on decolonization. But this time, events on the ground (the military victories of the PAIGC rebels and the defeatism of the colonial army) revealed the possibility of successful resistance to Portuguese rule. For the fascist dictatorship in Lisbon, however, it only reinforced their fear of the so-called “domino effect”, whereby the surrender of even the “dispensable” Guinea-Bissau would risk the loss of the richly endowed “pearl” of Angola (as well as Mozambique), where large communities of Portuguese had enjoyed the privileges of white settler domination since the state-sponsored emigration of the post-war years. Thus far, Portugal had succeeded in averting this threat because of the continuing support of her “oldest ally” and her other NATO partners in the Cold War, particularly the United States, which was determined to retain the Azores base for strategic purposes in any Middle East conflict.

As Portugal’s “oldest ally”, Britain was expected, at least by the Portuguese, to take the lead in defending it against hostile criticism in the international arena. But Britain, then under the Conservative Government of Edward Heath, had just joined the EEC (European Economic Community) (after two rejections earlier) and was thereby obliged to confer with its new European partners on foreign policy issues. In addition, Britain’s relations with Portugal had become increasingly strained over the issue of Portugal’s support for Rhodesia’s illegal declaration of independence (UDI) to preserve white settler rule and its refusal to comply with the UN-imposed sanctions against Rhodesia, which included the British Navy’s blockade of the Mozambique port of Beira. Nor had Portugal yielded to British persuasion to adapt its colonial policy to the “wind of change” transforming Africa, as former British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan had warned the apartheid government of South Africa a decade earlier. Instead, its failure to do so had placed Britain in the unenviable position of having to risk the loss of its Commonwealth and other Third World allies for the sake of defending a lost cause—in this case the preservation of a mythical Lusitanian entity.

Nevertheless, the tradition of appeasement was still a potent force within Britain's ruling Conservative Party, especially with Lord Home (then Sir Alec Douglas-Home) as foreign secretary in the Heath Government. Already he had embarked upon a mission of promoting Anglo-Portuguese ties, including his official state visit to that country. But when the British Government decided to reciprocate by inviting the Portuguese Prime Minister (Caetano had succeeded Salazar's forty year rule) to visit Britain to commemorate the 600th anniversary of the alliance between their two countries, this gratuitous gesture turned into a diplomatic disaster when widespread public protests demanded that the visit be cancelled. Leading the call was *The Times*, a most unusual role for "The Voice of the Establishment" or "The Old Thunderer", which featured on its front page a report of the massacre committed by Portuguese troops in the Mozambique district of Wiriyamu, an atrocity witnessed by the Burgos Fathers and relayed to *The Times* by a British priest.¹ Also protesting against the visit (as did this reviewer in a letter to *The Times*) was the Opposition Labour Party, which staged an "adjournment debate" in Parliament in which former Prime Minister Harold Wilson called for an end to Portugal's membership of NATO and international support for the "fighters for freedom" in Portugal's African colonies.² Similar demands were made at the various marches and public meetings organized by the Anti-Apartheid Movement and the "Solidarity Committees" on behalf of the liberation movements in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau which brought out tens of thousands of demonstrators.

Since these events occurred just before the UN's consideration of Guinea-Bissau's "Proclamation of Independence", they might well have cast a pall over Britain's traditional defence of its Portuguese ally. But it took more than that (in fact a revolution in Portugal the following April) to dispel the Conservative Government's or even to convince them that this massacre (among many others over the previous decade) had actually occurred. Meanwhile it was business as usual for Britain at the UN, where it first consulted its European partners, as well as its "special" American ally, but nevertheless voted in accordance with its long established practices. At the Security Council meeting, however, Britain was spared from having to use the veto (as Portugal had urged it to do) because Guinea-Bissau had decided to defer its application for UN membership until the following year, by which time the Portuguese regime had been overthrown.

The debate in the General Assembly also turned out to be somewhat of an anti-climax, with Britain relying upon the legal niceties that the Assembly still listed Guinea-Bissau as a "non-self-governing territory", not an independent republic eligible for UN membership. While it abstained (in the "good company" of its EEC partners) on these legal grounds, on the substantive issues—welcoming the independence of Guinea-Bissau and condemning the Portuguese presence there—it defied the EEC decision to abstain and cast the negative vote ordered by Home, this time in the "bad company" of fascist Portugal and Spain, apartheid South Africa and the military dictatorship in Brazil. Its only concession to the 93 voting in favour was

¹ "Missionary Names Five Survivors", *The Times*, 6 August 1973, p. 1. Such articles appeared throughout August.

² *House of Commons Debates*, vol. 860, 17 July 1973, cols. 269-77. Home, in reply, quite rightly pointed out that Wilson's previous governments had done no such thing. See col. 282.

to admonish Portuguese intransigence on its Chapter XI obligations as a colonial power, as it had been doing since the days of Macmillan.

Although (as MacQueen reveals in the Epilogue) the Labour Government which was returned to power in February 1974 attempted to mediate between the PAIGC and the Portuguese, both before and after the revolution, these negotiations broke down over the timing of a cease-fire and independence, and were subsequently convened in Algeria. However, Wilson's Government did not recognize the independence of Guinea-Bissau until August 1974, when the Security Council accepted the former colony's membership, despite the demands of many Labour MPs to do so earlier, perhaps influenced by the same legal niceties as their predecessors.

As for the role of the British Foreign Office in this episode, it may indeed have welcomed "an end to the ambiguity that characterized British diplomacy toward Portugal for half a century, as MacQueen concludes. However, it had been one of the main contributors to the "ambiguity" (especially through the infamous Information and Research Department or IRD) by advocating and implementing Cold War policies and practices which had the effect of sustaining the Portuguese dictatorship and prolonging its case for "containment".

Author's **RESPONSE** from **Norrie MacQueen**:

I'm grateful to Elaine Windrich for her interesting commentary on my recent piece in the *Journal of Cold War Studies*. As she suggests, there are no great differences in our perspectives on Anglo-Portuguese relations at this time. On a couple of points of detail, though, I think my understanding of things might be a little different. I can perhaps also offer a few additional bits and pieces to the narrative.

Firstly, I'm not sure how far Douglas-Home's association with the pre-1939 appeasement policy shaped his attitude to the Portuguese at this time. I suspect he was merely displaying the instincts of a very traditional, old-school British Conservative who had difficulty coming to terms with radical colonial nationalism.

Secondly, it wasn't the incoming Labour government that brokered the London talks between Portuguese and PAIGC representatives at the beginning of 1974. This had been a Conservative initiative, perhaps hatched in response to the Guiné issue at the UN but perhaps also driven by the earlier debacle of Caetano's visit to London in July 1973. Caetano's visit, by the way, wasn't in return for one by Douglas-Home to Portugal (I don't think he ever made such a trip, either as prime minister or foreign secretary); it reciprocated a tour of Portugal by the Duke of Edinburgh the previous month. The exchange was arranged as part of the 600th anniversary celebrations of the Anglo-Portuguese alliance.

Since the article was written, I've gathered a little more information on the British role in relation to Guiné in the period immediately before and after the Portuguese coup of April 1974. The pre-coup talks at the Hyde Park Hotel in mid-February 1974 were splashed as a scoop in the magazine section of the Lisbon weekly *Expresso* in 1994. The significance lay in the "discovery" that Caetano's apparently absolute and indivisible commitment to the integrity of the

empire seemed not to have been so absolute and indivisible after all. The suggestion was that he had finally summoned the resolution to face down the Salazarist *ultras* in the regime who had constrained his natural reforming instincts. My own view had been that the mere fact of the London talks was not as dramatic as had been suggested. In many respects, they were an offer – from a largely friendly and powerful European government - that Caetano could not really refuse, however irksome he found the prospect. He had to go through the motions, but he was not necessarily going to make any effort to agree a settlement. It has recently been suggested (in the doctoral thesis of Pedro Aires Oliveira of the Universidade Nova de Lisboa) that Caetano went along with the process specifically to protect negotiations with the United States for the acquisition of the Red Eye battlefield missile system.

As regards the choice of London as venue for the post-coup talks (the only ones over Portuguese Africa held outside of Africa or Portugal itself), my assumption had been that this came about because of the unique position of the incoming Labour government in Britain. On one side, PAIGC leaders had been warmly received as guests at the Party's 1973 annual conference. On the other, foreign secretary James Callaghan had a particularly close political relationship with Portuguese Socialist leader Mário Soares (then Portugal's lead negotiator on Guiné). A recent conversation with the retiring Portuguese ambassador to Britain, Fernando Andresen Guimarães, suggests otherwise. A junior diplomat in London in 1974, Guimarães recalls that the main reason was the back channel connections to the PAIGC provided by the London-based Committee for Freedom in Angola, Mozambique and Guiné, led by Lord Gifford. This became the Mozambique, Angola and Guiné Information Centre – MAGIC – after the independence of the African territories when it operated as a *de facto* diplomatic office for the three new states and recruited sympathisers (including myself) to work in them. The failure of the first sessions of these talks in London led to their suspension - and then their reconvening in Algiers. (Guimarães should not be confused with his son of the same name who in 1998 published a well-received book on the domestic and foreign origins of the Angolan civil war.)

The new Labour government did indeed resist pressure from some of its MPs for the immediate recognition of Guiné before negotiations had been completed. This was probably due to a combination of factors: bureaucratic pressure from the Foreign Office to “stick to proper form”; a concern not to compromise Britain's influence with Lisbon (particularly in the context of the Soares-Callaghan relationship already mentioned) as Portugal's position in NATO was beginning to look a little shaky at this time; and the fact that everyone knew that a rapid Portuguese withdrawal from Guiné was going to be agreed anyway.

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