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BOOK REVIEWS

The Guerrilla and the Journalist: Exploring the Murderous Legacy of Jonas Savimbi.

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Leading political figures are often viewed in distinctly contrasting ways. To some, Cecil Rhodes was a man of vision, to others he was a brutal imperialist. What is rare is to find a biographer who drastically revises his or her own earlier assessment of such a figure. Fred Bridgland's new book does that, effectively criticising harshly what he wrote of Jonas Savimbi almost 40 years ago.

Savimbi's National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), today Angola's main opposition party, has long had a bad press as a liberation movement. It was, of course, not UNITA but the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) that came to power in Luanda at independence in 1975. UNITA not only lost out in the struggle with the MPLA but was tainted by the assistance it obtained from South Africa and the Central Intelligence Agency of the United State of America (US) in late 1975, and then by the support it received from South Africa and the US in the civil war of the 1980s. In that decade, few tried to burnish UNITA's image in the West more than the British journalist Fred Bridgland. He did so in particular through publishing in 1986 a 600-page detailed and sympathetic book on Jonas Savimbi, the UNITA leader, written when the outcome of Angola's civil war remained unknown and Savimbi was a potential future ruler of that country. Bridgland now calls his earlier book a 'semi-biography' because he used Savimbi as 'the peg on which to hang the UNITA story' (70–71).

When Bridgland's *Jonas Savimbi* appeared in paperback in 1988, Savimbi was described on the cover as 'a key to Africa', as well as 'South Africa's ally and Mao's disciple'.¹ The paperback edition included a lengthy postscript that took UNITA's story from January 1986 to October 1987. No end to the civil war in Angola was then in sight and fighting had intensified as the US supplied UNITA with more sophisticated weaponry, while in October 1987 the South African Defence Force came to UNITA's aid on the banks of the Lomba river to turn back a large Angolan government offensive against it.

Written in lively prose, *Jonas Savimbi* vividly recounted Bridgland's visits to Angola in September 1975, when he first met UNITA's leader, and again in 1981 and 1983. He bravely spent long periods with the guerrilla fighters in the bush of central and southern Angola and at UNITA's headquarters at Jamba, close to the Namibian border. His book presented Savimbi as a charismatic and brilliant leader, a potential ruler of Angola who would be sympathetic to the West were he to come to power. In Bridgland's very full account, the arguments for supporting Savimbi were laid out, especially in a lengthy epilogue in which, in his own words, he 'let my opinions really hang out'.² UNITA was, he claimed, fighting for a democratic Angola against a Soviet-backed enemy. In this it had to be pragmatic and accept help where it could get it, even from the apartheid regime it despised.

Most reviewers of *Jonas Savimbi* admired its sweep and the detailed research that had gone into it, even when they disagreed with its sympathy for UNITA. At the end of his acknowledgements, Bridgland did advise his readers that he was not impartial in what he wrote. Quoting George Orwell, he suggested that his account, like any other, should be read critically, because it saw only 'one corner of events'. But few of those who read these words in the late 1980s could have anticipated that Bridgland would later so fully reject the portrait he then painted of Savimbi.

What readers of *Jonas Savimbi* were not told in that book was that it was co-authored by a young UNITA man whom Bridgland had befriended and then invited to Britain to help him write it. The guerrilla of the title of his new book, *The Guerrilla and the Journalist*, is not Savimbi but Pedro Ngueve Jonatão "Tito" Chingunji, a close confidant of Savimbi who rose through UNITA's ranks to become the movement's premier diplomat, stationed in Washington. Much of *The Guerrilla and the Journalist* concerns the evolving relationship between Chingunji and Bridgland. Bridgland's refutation of his earlier assessment of Savimbi is mostly implicit, and only occasionally explicit.

It was through Chingunji, then in his early twenties and an officer in UNITA's army, that Bridgland, then Reuters' Central African correspondent based in Lusaka, Zambia, gained entrée to UNITA. In November 1975 Bridgland won international fame by revealing that UNITA was working with apartheid South Africa. Despite this exposé, which in the long run would cause UNITA enormous harm, Chingunji was able to persuade Bridgland to return to Angola and walk hundreds of kilometres to watch UNITA's fighters go into combat. The journalist was enormously impressed by the guerrillas he met and with the ways in which UNITA was continuing its struggle against the forces of the MPLA government of Angola.

Chingunji and Bridgland then worked together to write the biography that appeared under Bridgland's name and portrayed the charismatic Savimbi as the man who would lead Angola away from reliance on the Soviet Union and the Cubans. This was the time when Savimbi was invited by US President Ronald Reagan to the White House. The US Secretary of State and leading officials of other countries visited Savimbi at his headquarters in southern Angola, and he travelled to Cape Town on a number of occasions for discussions with Prime Minister, then President, P. W. Botha and members of the South African government.

Readers of *The Guerrilla and the Journalist* who remember Bridgland's biography of Savimbi will find that some of the story it tells in its early chapters, such as about UNITA's Long March in 1976, draws heavily on that earlier work. But from 1988 it tells a new story, for it was in September that year, not long after *Jonas Savimbi* appeared in paperback, that Chingunji summoned Bridgland to Washington to tell him that he had kept quiet about Savimbi's murderous behaviour in the past, and that he and his family were now under constant threat of death from the UNITA leader. This 'devastating information', Bridgland now admits, 'ran totally contrary to the narrative of *Jonas Savimbi*' (180). Bridgland then started to uncover more evidence of atrocities that revealed Savimbi to be not the champion of his people that he had portrayed him to be, in his biography, but a tyrant who ordered people to be killed at whim.

Against the advice of many of those close to him, Chingunji obeyed Savimbi's summons to return to the UNITA headquarters at Jamba. Knowing that the life of his friend was in danger there, Bridgland went to Jamba to plead his case with Savimbi. He now presents a detailed account of how he was met there with Savimbi's rage and denials. In 1992, when he was based in South Africa, Bridgland confronted

the visiting Savimbi in the very different environment of Cape Town's most prestigious hotel, the Mount Nelson, with rumours of Chingunji's death, only to be told that the former foreign secretary and UNITA representative in Washington was alive and well. Not long after that, evidence emerged that Chingunji had, in fact, been brutally murdered the previous year, on Savimbi's orders, along with most of his family.

After providing us with as much information as is known of the circumstances of Chingunji's death, Bridgland goes on to recount what evidence he has collected of other killings for which Savimbi was responsible. These date back to before the infamous witch-burning of September 1983, the story of which is here told very graphically in detail seemingly based mainly on evidence from Chingunji's brother, Eduardo, and Florbela Catarina Malaquias, the author of a memoir published in 2019.³ Bridgland now presents Savimbi as a monster and psychopath, guilty of ordering the killing of many of those close to him, along with their families.

Readers may wonder why, as knowledge of Savimbi's atrocities circulated in UNITA circles in the 1980s, more did not try to escape the tyrant's grip. Bridgland does, however, now tell the remarkable story of how one of Savimbi's leading generals, who had personal experience of imprisonment and poisoning, did eventually switch sides in 1992 and then worked for the Angolan state to eliminate Savimbi, a goal he helped achieve in 2002, bringing Angola's long civil war to an end.

After Chingunji's death, Bridgland began to publish short pieces about Savimbi's atrocities, and other writers began to refer to them. The Angolan novelist Sousa Jamba mentioned the witch-burning in the heavily autobiographical *Patriots*, published in 1990;⁴ and one shrewd analyst began his review of Jamba's book by saying, 'Terrible things have happened – and are still happening – in Angola'.⁵ Robin Hallett went on to tell his readers that 'Savimbi has conducted a sophisticated publicity operation which allowed his gullible hosts in Washington and elsewhere to overlook the fact that he is probably the most ruthlessly totalitarian leader that contemporary Africa has ever produced'.⁶ In *The Guerrilla and the Journalist*, which is not an academic work, Bridgland does not refer to the leading recent academic study of UNITA in English, Justin Pearce's *Political Identity and Conflict in Central Angola, 1975–2002*, which briefly discusses Savimbi's 'rule by fear'.⁷

For a time Bridgland did not entirely reject his previous judgment of Savimbi as having 'for a time represented hope for the Angolan people', and saw him as having only, over time, turned into a dictator.⁸ But as more evidence emerged of earlier atrocities that Savimbi had committed, Bridgland came to the view, presented in *The Guerrilla and the Journalist*, that he had always been a manipulative and paranoid tyrant prepared to kill anyone he viewed as a threat to his power, and anyone associated with them. That this detailed reassessment has only been published in 2022 may be explained in part by the time it took for rumours to be confirmed and for detailed evidence to emerge. Bridgland also published other books, including a new version of his account of the battles around Cuito Cuanavale in 1987–1988,⁹ before eventually producing this one. What we are not told is whether he hesitated to publish it to help protect UNITA in present-day Angola from being tainted with the reality of what Savimbi had been like.

Written for a general readership, *The Guerrilla and the Journalist* will dissatisfy specialists for a number of reasons, beyond the fact that it does not engage with the relevant academic literature. A polemical account, it does not set out to present a balanced assessment of Savimbi. For such an assessment one needs to bear in mind what



Bridgland wrote in his first book and, say, Savimbi's contribution to ensuring that Angola did eventually emerge as a multiparty state. And this book fails to set the dramatic story it tells in sufficient context. There is no mention, for example, of the massacres perpetrated by Savimbi's enemy, the MPLA, which in 1977 executed mass killings that far dwarfed anything for which Savimbi was responsible.¹⁰ Over time more and more information has emerged on the atrocities committed in the Angolan camps of the ANC and SWAPO liberation movements.¹¹ There is, moreover, little in *The Guerrilla and the Journalist* about the 'legacy' of Savimbi, as promised in the subtitle. In 2019 UNITA reburied his body, 17 years after his death, and at that time he was presented as an esteemed former leader of that movement. In August 2022, under new leadership, UNITA came very close to winning the Angolan general election. Will those in the party who continue to hold Savimbi up as a hero have any second thoughts about doing so if they read this devastating account of a man who, for all his charisma and charm, Bridgland now presents as a tyrant and murderer in the Idi Amin mould?

Notes

1. F. Bridgland, *Jonas Savimbi: A Key to Africa* (Sevenoaks: Coronet Books, 1988).
2. *Ibid.*, 16.
3. F.C. Malaquias, *Heroínas da dignidade: livro I* (Luanda: Book Link, 2019).
4. S. Jamba, *Patriots* (London: Viking, 1990), chapter 22 and esp. 200.
5. R. Hallett, 'Patriots', *Southern African Review of Books*, July/August (1993), 19.
6. *Ibid.*
7. J. Pearce, *Political Identity and Conflict in Central Angola, 1975–2002* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), esp. 113–115. For Savimbi's atrocities also see, for example, A. Malaquias, *Rebels and Robbers: Violence in Post-Colonial Angola* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2007), esp. 97–98.
8. F. Bridgland, 'Savimbi et l'exercice du pouvoir: un témoignage', *Politique Africaine*, 57 (1995), 99.
9. F. Bridgland, *Cuito Cuanavale: 12 Months of War that Transformed a Continent* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2017).
10. L. Pawson, *In the Name of the People: Angola's Forgotten Massacre* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2014); P. Trehwela, 'Joe Slovo, the SACP and the Angola Massacre of May 1977', *Politicsweb*, 26 January 2015, <https://www.politicsweb.co.za/news-and-analysis/joe-slovo-the-sacp-and-the-angola-massacre-of-may->, accessed 20 February 2023.
11. P. Trehwela, *Inside Quatro: Uncovering the Exile History of the ANC and SWAPO* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2009); L. Dyasop, *Out of Quatro: From Exile to Exoneration* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2021); O. Angula, *Swapo Captive: A Comrade's Experience of Betrayal and Torture* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2018).

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