

Book Review: In the Name of the People: Angola's Forgotten Massacre by Lara Pawson

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Lara Pawson's new book focuses on the story behind the horrifying but little-known massacre in Angola in the late 1970s. Megan Smith finds that this work may be too light on detail and analysis to please academics, but it nonetheless manages to expose an otherwise muted story key to understanding Angola's political and cultural history.

In the Name of the People: Angola's Forgotten Massacre. Lara Pawson. IB Tauris. 2014.

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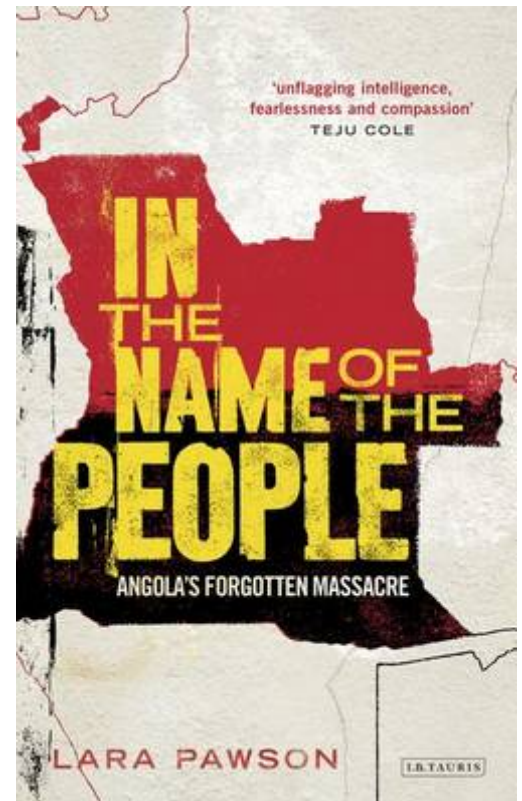
The violent events on and after 27 May 1977, or *vinte e sete*, at the height of the Cold War, are often left un-discussed. As Lara Pawson, former BBC correspondent for Angola, argues, this relatively unknown massacre of tens of thousands of protestors in Angola is a key part of understanding contemporary Angolan politics and the country's *cultura do medo*, or culture of fear, with regards to public dissent.

With her book, *In the Name of the People*, Pawson produces an engaging mosaic of interviews conducted with residents in London, Lisbon, and Angola, alongside her own independent research. Pawson seeks to shed light on such an integral moment in Angolan history, a tragedy which she argues is comparable to Robert Mugabe's Matabeleland massacres in Zimbabwe in the 1980s, where more than [20,000 members of the minority Ndebele ethnic group](#) were wiped out (p.5).

Pawson's writing style, with its vivid imagery, is captivating. The narrative is composed of her personal journey, written in the first person, to better understand *vinte e sete* alongside interviews of those who experienced it first hand. It is not an academic text per se; however, Pawson supplies an illuminating account of Angola's contemporary history and politics. The book is digestible, entertaining and informative for those new to the topic and region as well as being in-depth enough to cater to those with more expertise in the region.

The Popular Movement of the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) has led the country from its much belated independence from Portugal in 1975 to this day. Not long after independence, the party leadership was divided ideologically, eventually culminating in *vinte e sete*. We learn that the factionalist splinter group *Nitistas*, led by former minister Nito Alvez, lead to – depending whom you choose to believe – an attempted coup, peaceful demonstration, or both. The MPLA's narrative is the former; when senior figures within the political party were killed, they sought revenge on those it considered responsible. The result was death camps, firing squads, and imprisonment without trial. The death count of innocent Angolans imputed to be *Nitistas* is debated to this day, with figures ranging from 15,000 up to 90,000 (p.221).

Ideology was a key component of the crisis. The country's first leader under independence, President Neto was forceful in his rhetoric: 'we will do what we want in the name of the People', echoed in the title of Pawson's book. The



People, the party, and the President became synonymous with each other, consolidating power within Neto's regime. Pawson illustrates her point with a segment from a leader piece in the *Jornal de Angola* published on 8 May 1977, headlined "National Unity". The piece claimed that 'Angolan people are the MPLA. The MPLA are the Angolan people', a notion that Pawson describes as 'revolutionary parody' (p.81). Supporting Neto was projected as defending the nation state and the revolution. The MPLA, with its supposed socialist principles, shifted from a national liberation movement to an eventual dictatorship.

Cuban-Angolan relations started in the 1960s as part of Fidel Castro's 'Second Revolution' movement. One of Pawson's interviewees notes, 'Living in Luanda was a bit like living in Havana. At school we were made to sing the Cuban national anthem, and the Cuban flag went up alongside the Angolan flag' (p.230). In the chapter, "A Cuba Connection", Pawson interviews a Cuban doctor who recounts being forced to sign faked death certificates – road accidents for those who were executed by firing squad. Eleven days before Nito Alvez's uprising, Fidel Castro told a US journalist that the primary reason for Cuban troops to be in Angola was to defend the imperialists from South Africa and elsewhere. More than one hundred Angolans were sent to Cuba for intensive military training to then in turn defend Angola from invading forces. Developments in this chapter reveal that the intervention of Cuban troops was pivotal for Neto's declaration of independence and indeed enabled the MPLA to remain in power beyond Angolan independence. One of Pawson's interviewees notes 'those who are guilty must be judged, including the Cubans and the Soviet Union.' (p.26)

In the Name of the People is partially a memoir; the first few chapters are muddled in sometimes-unnecessary personal anecdotes, though these lessen towards the middle of the book. In particular, Pawson's chapter "Appearances" does not reveal much on her subject area except a trip to the beauty salon and an unwanted advance from an Angolan man. Furthermore, some of the research observations are a little tenuous at times with interviews being casual and mostly subjective recreations of memory and confession. However, this is a challenging subject resource-wise, an almost complete lack of archival and official documents on the event leaves much to be desired. Despite these minor criticisms, Pawson does an effective job of deconstructing this event and the issues around the liberation struggle in Angola through conversations with a varied group of participants that leaves the reader with mostly insightful testimonies.

Frantz Fanon is everywhere, both implicitly and explicitly, with regards to postcolonial nation building and national liberation struggles. General issues surrounding the transition from colonial to self-rule are expressed through this period. Pawson quotes Fanon, 'today the party's mission is to deliver to the people the instructions, which issue from the summit' (p.81). This echoes what is seen in Angola since independence: a dictatorship, with the masses at the bottom. The authoritarian character still shows no signs of waning, with José Eduardo Dos Santos, the current president who has ruled for 34 years, [securing yet another five-year term in the 2012 elections](#).

Pawson argues that for many Angolans, *vinte e sete* was, 'the beginning of the end... the moment when the MPLA turned on its own' (p.86). It was this disproportionate response by the MPLA which created a culture of fear. It became taboo to even mention the massacre. In regards to Pawson's admired left leaning journalists, she notes 'Either they didn't write about the *vinte e sete* at all, or if they did, like Basil Davidson, they only told the story from the official MPLA point of view.' (p.42). Pawson's final chapter goes into dissent in contemporary Angola. In 2011, Ikonoklasta, the popular Angolan rapper, attempted to [mobilise Angolans to protest against the government](#) at Independence Square. Only seventeen people (four being journalists) gathered for the short-lived protest which saw them all arrested. Furthermore, the government has continued to consolidate this *cultura do medo* publicly. After the Arab Spring, the MPLA's first provincial secretary made it clear that protests would not be tolerated, and that 'Angola is not Egypt, Libya or Tunisia' (p.246).

In the Name of the People: Angola's Forgotten Massacre guides the reader through a very ambiguous historical event that is key to understanding contemporary Angolan politics. Whether or not this book can be seen as entirely reliable is another story; it is far from academic, but nonetheless Pawson manages to expose an otherwise muted story key to understanding Angola's political and cultural history.

Megan Smith is completing her MSc in International Relations at the LSE. She has worked throughout East Africa and the Middle East with most recent fieldwork conducted in Egypt with the Africa and Middle East Refugee Assistance. Her research focuses on refugee assistance with a special focus on gender. Follow her on Twitter at [@Megan_D_Smith](#).

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