

Comment

Having for years sedulously avoided any critical comment on the enormous American military presence in Vietnam, the British politicians and press have now expressed themselves as profoundly shocked by the presence of Cubans in Angola. They were not shocked, only embarrassed, by the hired gunmen who went out to kill Angolans on behalf of the FNLA (which means Zaire, which means the United States) and even this little problem was soon solved when the gunmen started murdering each other instead. The general impression was given that the only way to account for the speedy victory of a socialist movement of Africans was to suppose that the thing had been taken over by proper professional soldiers in a European tradition and with a lot of sophisticated equipment.

Several things were not stressed: such as that a very much larger and much more sophisticated American military machine, involving a huge airforce had no such success in South East Asia. They failed because very few of the people who lived there actually wanted them to win; it is at least arguable that the success of the MPLA has to do with the amount of public support they could rely on. Naturally it was not mentioned that most of the Cubans would be black anyway and a fair proportion of them Angolan by descent. Nearly a million slaves were taken from Angola to Cuba in the early nineteenth century and it is entirely appropriate that their descendants should return to assist in the liberation of their country. (A correspondent in the *Irish Times* has recently drawn a parallel with the Irish Americans who returned to take part in the war of independence.) The Cuban force—a good deal smaller than the British one currently in Northern Ireland—was constantly depicted as a set of ‘battle-hardened’ veterans (Which battle? When? With whom?—the Bay of Pigs perhaps?) and the suggestion was that without them the MPLA, who have been fighting and organising with increasing success since the middle sixties, would have been helpless.

In the same context there was a macabre interest in watching Harold Wilson shed his peace-loving image as the implications for Rhodesia of the Angola victory became apparent. There was a time (when it was simply a question of defending the people of Rhodesia against a gang of settlers who had illegally grabbed power) when Wilson, unlike the then Archbishop of Canterbury, piously ruled out the use of force in any circumstances. British soldiers were meant to die to preserve the ridiculous Constitution of Northern Ireland, not to defend the constitutional rights of a lot of black people in Africa. Now, however, when Ian Smith and his bully-boys seem in some danger of getting what they deserve there begins to be talk of military intervention on their

behalf. Naturally Mr Wilson would prefer that Ian Smith should 'come to his senses' and institute reforms which would stave off the evil day when the Rhodesians are actually in charge of their own country, but clearly he fears that it may be too late for this.

The sense of relief that under the MPLA Angola seems to have an effective government with clear socialist policies should not make us too starry-eyed about the immediate future. The Church, for example, in the short run is going to suffer because of the victory of the MPLA. As after the Cuban revolution there has been a massive exodus of foreign priests: more than half of them are said to have left. Undoubtedly their motives have not usually been disreputable; much of their work simply disintegrated under the chaotic conditions of the war; still their move has been resented and though most of them probably intend to return it is not certain that they will be welcome, especially to the government. Agostinho Neto once said that a liberated Angola would have no need of white missionaries but, apart from the fact that this is a point of view increasingly widespread amongst white missionaries themselves, this is not any part of the MPLA programme. It would seem in any case that in general the missionaries are popular, especially because of their work during the devastation of war, and there is most unlikely to be any frontal attack on their position. Nevertheless there is bound to be a period of hostility to the Church. A depressing sign of the times is the document alleged to have been circulated recently in the sister organisation, Frelimo, in Mozambique, which argues that when the time is ripe, when political consciousness has been sufficiently awakened 'we shall be able to destroy the Catholic Church' but in the meantime the influence of this reactionary and counter-revolutionary organisation is to be undermined in every possible way. There is talk of working within the Church to progressively replace the religious by the Marxist element. That last bit has a rather familiar ring and since the document has not been acknowledged by Frelimo it may well have been invented by the CIA, but if it is authentic then it looks as though Mozambique and perhaps Angola will not be able to skip the dreary generation during which socialists have to gradually unlearn the clichés of their textbooks and rediscover—as Christians are doing—what Christianity is about. A church with as bad a history of collusion with the colonial regime as the Catholic Church in Portuguese Africa had until fairly recently can hardly complain if it has to go through this purgative way, and the final result will doubtless be, as already in some older socialist countries, a revitalised Christianity. But it would certainly help if we Christians could encourage the Marxists to revise the textbooks in the light of more recent ecclesiastical history.

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