

Publication

The History of Angola

Book Item (Buchkapitel, Lexikonartikel, jur. Kommentierung, Beiträge in Sammelbänden)

ID 4248898

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Year 2017

Title The History of Angola

Editor(s) Spear, Thomas; [et al.],

Book title Oxford Research Encyclopedia, African History

Publisher Oxford University Press USA

Place of publication New York

Series title Oxford Research Encyclopedias

Keywords transatlantic slave trade, forced labor, Luso-African, colonialism, New State, nationalism, civil war, west central Africa

Angola's contemporary political boundaries resulted from 20th-century colonialism. The roots of Angola, however, reach far into the past. When Portuguese caravels arrived in the Congo River estuary in the late 15th century, independent African polities dotted this vast region. Some people lived in populous, hierarchical states such as the Kingdom of Kongo, but most lived in smaller political entities centered on lineage-village settlements. The Portuguese colony of Angola grew out of a settlement established at Luanda Bay in 1576. From its inception, Portuguese Angola existed to profit from the transatlantic slave trade, which became the colony's economic foundation for the next three centuries. A Luso-African population and a creole culture developed in the colonial nuclei of Luanda and Benguela (founded 1617). The expansion of the colonial state into the interior occurred intermittently until the end of the 19th century, when Portuguese authorities initiated a series of wars of conquest that lasted up until the end of the First World War. During the 20th century, the colonial state consolidated military control over the whole territory, instituted an infrastructure of administration, and developed an economy of resource extraction. A nationalist sentiment developed among Luso-African thinkers in the early 20th century, and by the 1950s these ideas coalesced into a nationalist movement aimed at independence. Simultaneously, anticolonial movements developed among mission-educated elites in the Kikongo-speaking north and in the Umbundu-speaking central highlands. Portugal's authoritarian New State leaders brutally suppressed these disparate nationalist movements during more than a decade of guerrilla war. A revolution in Portugal in 1974 ushered in negotiations leading to Angolan independence on November 11, 1975. Competing nationalist movements, bolstered by foreign intervention, refused to share governance and as a result plunged Angola into a brutal civil war that lasted until 2002.

URL <http://africanhistory.oxfordre.com>

edoc-URL <https://edoc.unibas.ch/59396/>

Full Text on edoc No;

Digital Object Identifier DOI 10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.180