

Book Review

A FAR-AWAY WAR: Angola, 1975–1989 **Ian Liebenberg, Jorge Risquet and Vladimir** **Shubin (Editors)**

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This book is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature on the conflict increasingly referred to as the ‘Southern Africa Thirty-Year War’. That armed conflict extended from the Mpondo Rebellion, which started in 1960 and the uprisings in northern Angola in 1961, to the final whimpers of township unrest in South Africa in the early 1990s. It included the protracted insurgencies of the former Portuguese territories of Angola and Mozambique, the brutal Rhodesian ‘Bush War’ for Zimbabwean liberation, the foreign involvement in the Angolan civil war, the fight for the independence of Namibia and the ‘Struggle’ in South Africa.

Historians increasingly see it as one long war, simply because the protagonists, while not waging it as an integrated and formally coordinated conflict, had two clear aims: the maintenance of white hegemony on the one side, and national liberation on the other, and they had a loose alliance on each side. The various campaigns of this war followed a common thread on both sides, and the battles were waged and operations conducted within the same approximate period of thirty years. It was, in fact, a sub-continent embroiled in a mostly low-intensity war for three long decades.

The literature that has emerged in recent years has been varied, and some campaigns and clashes in this complex conflict have received more attention than others. Much of what has been written has been in the form of memoirs or recollections

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by participants, with relatively little appearing that is based on careful historical research. The strife in Angola between the time of that country's controversial and contested birth as an independent state in 1975 and the withdrawal of Cuban and South African surrogate forces in 1989 has, for the most part, been recorded and published by South African participants, or authors depicting events from the South African perspective. This alone, makes *A far-away war* an extremely valuable English-language contribution (despite the cover incorrectly claiming that it depicts both sides of the story).

Contemporary history (that within living memory) will always evoke emotions and result in controversy. This is perhaps even more so in the case of contemporary military history, where emotions have frequently been sharpened by battle and by the supreme sacrifice of comrades who have earned that epithet in the crucible of combat. The credentials of the author (in this case, the editors and contributors) are therefore of vital importance in a book such as this. The three principal editors are firstly a South African academic who is openly critical of the military approach of the former South African regime; secondly, a Cuban government official and former member of the Cuban Communist Party Central Committee; and thirdly, a Russian academic and former Soviet official of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. As is therefore to be expected, the book portrays one side of the conflict in a favourable light, and casts anything but complimentary views on the other.

Although this probably helps the discerning reader to add some balance to the many publications on the war that have reflected the opposing viewpoint, this book does not, in itself, claim to provide an objective perspective. In fact, the editors make it clear in the introduction that they “cannot claim ownership of the truth about the war in Angola”, and that their intention is merely to “allow different voices to speak and other voices to be heard about an era of war in southern Africa” (p11).

The book is a compendium of interpretations of the war, commencing with a useful, if somewhat disjointed, background to the conflict in and over Namibia. This, however, does not provide much detail of the lengthy UN/South African wrangling over South West Africa/Namibia, and it gives nothing of substance on military strategy. It then goes on to place the war in Angola into perspective, using the Cold War as a template. After discussing the militarisation of white society in South Africa over the period 1972–1988, there are some enlightening contributions on the involvement in Angola of the Cubans, the Soviets and the East Germans. The book concludes with a rather lengthy diatribe on conscription and an attempt

to raise the historical profile of the resistance to compulsory military service that existed among some white South Africans.

For those whose previous reading on the war in question may have been restricted to the so-called ‘SADF [South African Defence Force] version’, much of what is dealt with in this publication will come as a surprise – even a revelation. Other information could well simply confirm long-held beliefs or suspicions about the war. In both cases, this is possibly the greatest contribution of the book.

However, in a sense, the book is a missed opportunity. The absence of any Namibian or Angolan contributions could be seen as a glaring shortcoming in a book about war in Angola, which was waged largely over the future of Namibia. Perhaps less attention could have been given to the questions of militarisation of white South African society and conscientious objection to conscription, as these are both enormous subjects about which little has seen the light in recent years. They certainly both warrant intensive further research and publications in their own right, the works of Cock and Nathan, as well as Conway, notwithstanding. However, they are decidedly peripheral to the Angolan conflict. *A far-away war* might rather have included viewpoints of the FAPLA¹ and PLAN² participation in the war in order to give a more rounded reflection of “the other side” (as the book’s cover terms it).

The book has an exceptionally comprehensive and valuable bibliography, listing what is probably the most complete collection of works on or related to the Thirty-Year War that has ever been compiled. However, although the titles include works in English, Afrikaans, Portuguese, Spanish and Russian, readers should not expect coverage of campaigns not involving South African military adventurism in Angola to be covered. As can be expected, there is very little of the literature listed that deals with the campaigns in Rhodesia and Mozambique.

The considerable number of photographs taken from Cuban archives and from Russian sources is a particularly impressive feature of the book. Most publications of this conflict tend to use and re-use familiar photos, mostly taken from the South African side. It is therefore indeed refreshing to see pictures that throw fresh light on certain aspects of the war because they were taken from the other side. Sadly, it would appear that the Cuban archives were not as forthcoming in providing written documentary sources for use by contributors.

Another useful table is the chronology, “Namibia: From Colony to Independent State”. It might have been worthwhile to include some admittedly generally known events (such as the start and the end of the World Wars, and the

invasion of German South West Africa by South Africa in 1914), if only to contextualise the other events that are listed.

On the matter of contextualisation, the summary by Professor Phil Eidelberg of the Angolan War as a Cold War template is excellent. It is certainly the most balanced and succinct conspectus I have read of the circumstances that led to and sustained Soviet involvement in Angola. It succeeds in making sense of much that otherwise seems confusing.

Both López and the two Shubins provide some valuable, previously little-known information of great interest. Hedelberto López gives an excellent sketch of the run-up to the intense fighting in Angola during 1975/1976 from the Cuban point of view, while Vladimir and Gennady Shubin give a good exposition of how the Soviets came to be involved. Albeit based mainly on secondary sources and interviews, their use of the notebooks of the Soviet military advisor in Angola over a period of three years reveals some compelling and incontrovertible aspects of the conflict, recorded at the time by a very senior Soviet general officer. The Shubins, however, seem to have misread the aims of the SADF in Angola, completely missing the intention to counter SWAPO's insurgency. They thus tend to portray the many SADF incursions as far bigger than they actually were.

Nevertheless, they openly provide intriguing insights into tensions and disagreements between the Cubans, Angolans and Soviets during operations. FAPLA setbacks, poor decisions and failures are also referred to, all of which add to the credibility of their account. Their contribution contains possibly the most profound statement in the entire book, "Peace was to arrive only years later in Angola following the death of Jonas Savimbi whose ineffectual movement, UNITA, had been built up through foreign intervention since 1975 to become a major destabilising factor in Angola." (p97) Of course, the irony is that precisely the same could be said about how the initially ineffective MPLA had been sustained through the years of war by foreign intervention.

López, in his Cuban contribution, is carefully selective about casualty figures, and he scrupulously avoids any reference to the charismatic General Arnaldo Ochoa Sánchez, who was the commander of Cuban forces in Angola but was subsequently executed by the Castro regime for controversial treason charges coupled to drug running. Some have claimed that his demise was due to Cuban military failure in Angola. However, it would probably be a bit much to expect revelations on this dark matter from a journalist and historian from Havana who was once a permanent correspondent of *Juventud Rebelde*, the official Cuban Communist Party youth journal.

Liebenberg contributes a fascinating chapter on Russian–South African relations over more than a century, although it is coloured by his apparent obsession with dismissing the Cold War as Western fiction. He concludes with the quaint, but somewhat tenuous claim that there is a link between the support of the Boers by Tsarist Russia during the Anglo-Boer War, and the support of the liberation movements by Communist USSR during their struggle. This he bases rather nebulously and unconvincingly on “historical ties and emotional bonds” (p79).

The chapter on the involvement of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) (East Germany) is the only one to make use of official archival documents. Doubtless, this is because that country has been reunited with the non-Communist Federal Republic of Germany (then known as West Germany), so there is no longer the restriction on access to such archives that would apply in a Communist country. This makes it possibly the most convincing contribution in the compilation that forms this book. The authors, Dr (Major) Klaus Storkmann and Prof. Ulrich van der Heyden, have made a careful study of official documentation with minimal use of secondary sources. Their engrossing outline of the initial reluctance of the GDR to provide support to the MPLA due to its own financial constraints, and of Erich Honecker’s personal commitment and support where possible make absorbing reading that prompts further consultation of other works. The authors effectively dispel the horror stories of large-scale involvement in Angola by East German paratroopers.

The greatest shortcoming for a book of this nature is undoubtedly the poorly reproduced maps of the area under discussion (specifically, Angola). These maps have unfortunately been compiled from the point of view of SADF involvement, which is certainly not the focus of the book. They show very few of the places referred to by the Cuban and other writers. Importantly, they also do not name the rivers, which were a crucial aspect of operations during the war. The maps are therefore of little use to the reader.

Another unfortunate shortcoming that could be levelled at the book is the tendency by some of the contributors to view the ebb and flow of war as purely military, with little regard for political imperatives. While it makes for good copy and political correctness to portray some actions by the SADF as military defeats, there is no effort made to examine the international and diplomatic pressures that left soldiers with no choice but to obey their political masters, regardless of how successful they may or may not have been on the battlefield at that point.

Perhaps this tendency in the book is driven by the fact that there is a dearth of professional military men among the contributors. While some had served as

conscripts, one of the editors spent eight years in the Soviet military and another was apparently a major, possibly in the East German Armed Forces, none had served in the higher echelons of command. This is somewhat surprising for a compendium on a modern war. This absence of professional military inputs raises the question of the classification of histories of conflicts.

Although there are contesting opinions on this classification of the type of history portrayed in literature about armed conflict, I personally subscribe to the view that 'War History' deals with all aspects of a war, such as political, social, economic, cultural, technological development and biographical works on prominent political decision-makers in those fields, with the purely military aspects forming only a constituent part of the overall picture. 'Military History' on the other hand, is a far narrower field and consists exclusively of the battles, skirmishes, tactics, techniques, technology application, strategy and military personalities forming part of that war. I get the impression that this book was an attempt to write military history, but that in fact, it is far broader, and actually covers war history.

In military history, correct military terminology and understanding is important. Incorrect or faulty terminology detracts from the credibility and value of any book on military history. A military historian, if not a military person should become acquainted with common military jargon, official terminology and basic organisation. This book contains numerous errors that will jar a military reader. For example, the "airborne soldiers" referred to on page 28 were also conscripts, though they were conscripts who had volunteered for parachute training. The first skirmish with SWAPO in 1966, although officially a police action, involved as many SADF members as police officers. Multiple rocket launchers (MRLs) are also regarded as artillery, and the SADF version was developed as a result of clashes with Cuban, not Angolan MRLs; and the 'arms race' in southern Africa had, on the SADF side, less to do with the quantity of arms, than with their quality, as population limitations alone restricted the numbers that could be deployed. On a technical point which is frequently missed by writers (including one in this book), the Casspir mine-resistant vehicle was never spelled 'Caspir' – its name was a jumbled acronym formed from the abbreviation CSIR (for the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research) who had designed and developed the vehicle, and SAP (South African Police) who had been responsible for its specifications.

Liebenberg, as the principal contributor, is at pains to emphasise what he terms Cold War' mythology, even "paranoia" (p69) This is a difficult angle with which to come to grips, particularly as the Cold War is accepted by most of the other contributors as a hard fact, and there are few serious historians who would

deny its reality during the post-war era of the 1950s to the end of the 1980s. The fact is that liberation movements, no less than any other political entity of the time, manipulated circumstances in the bipolar world of the Cold War to get what support they could from whatever source was available. In fact, the frequently derisive comments in the book about the ‘constructive engagement’ policy of the United States of America towards apartheid South Africa, merely serve to confirm the reality of the Cold War.

It is mendacious for Shubin to claim, “what was described by the West as a Cold War, (was described) by the Soviet Union as support for national liberation movements in an anti-colonial struggle” (p83). This blatantly ignores the situation in Europe, where the forces of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact faced each other in a state of alert, and it makes light of the nuclear stand-off between the super-powers. While the Soviets certainly wanted to help socialist forces come to power all over the world, it would be naïve to believe that in an international arena of super-power politics and an international bipolar struggle, this was done for purely altruistic reasons. The war in Angola may have been peripheral to the central struggle, but it was certainly part of that power play.

The production and acquisition of armament is always a murky minefield for a writer to enter, and needs to be done with great circumspection. This is not only because it is an emotional issue, but because the deals that are involved are frequently devious and the trails are thus carefully covered up. Conclusive facts are therefore often difficult to ascertain, and sources seldom agree in detail. However, those matters that are indisputable should be diligently established by anyone including such matters in a history. For instance, *A far-away war* makes no reference to the short-lived Middle East Defence Organisation (MEDO) as the source of South Africa’s first major, modern, post-Second World War armament acquisition.

In the wake of the Second World War and the advent of the confrontation that become known as the Cold War, a series of defence treaties were signed in the West. These included NATO, SEATO (the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization), ANZUS (the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty), and MEDO. South Africa was a signatory to MEDO, signed in London in 1951, in terms of which a South African armoured division and nine South African Air Force squadrons would be provided to help counter any Soviet offensive through the Middle East aimed at Africa. This was pure Cold War strategy, and although the agreement was abandoned in 1957 in the aftermath of the Suez debacle, it did result in South Africa being supplied with 201 Centurion tanks, as well as Saracen armoured personnel carriers and Ferret scout cars (these were not provided in the

1960s, as Liebenberg avers). Similarly, South Africa's involvement in the Korean War led to the acquisition of aircraft (the Canadair Sabre Mk 6 was one of these, acquired from Canada – something the Canadians today studiously avoid mentioning). The Simon's Town Agreement of 1955 resulted in the Union acquiring six frigates, ten minesweepers and four other coastal defence vessels from Britain. All this was a direct result of the Cold War.

This context is missing from the book, perhaps because of the element of denialism about the Cold War, which is propagated in some contributions. But it is disingenuous to judge the 1950s through a 21st-century lens. Memories of the Second World War were fresh in people's minds, and in the West, the Soviet repression in Hungary and other Eastern European countries was interpreted as a stark confirmation of Soviet expansionist intentions. Western political and military leaders saw the conflicts and confrontations in Korea, Indo-China, Malaya, Borneo and later Cuba, Czechoslovakia and Vietnam as a very real part of the Cold War. It is easy to dismiss this as a 'myth', a 'syndrome' or 'myopia' in the light of the subsequent demise of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, but in doing so, one forgets that this collapse took the West, no less than the Soviets themselves, by surprise.

It is also incorrect to ascribe the development of the highly successful Ratel infantry combat vehicle to lessons learnt during the SADF incursion into Angola in 1975 and confrontations with Cuban armoured forces. The design and development of the Ratel commenced in the early 1970s, well before any encounter with Cuban armament. The development of South African artillery, however, was certainly inspired by the Angolan adventure and the artillery duels that were fought then.

Furthermore, the implication that Namibian independence struggles have always been national is highly questionable. The indigenous people at the time of the German colonisation had no concept of a country that was fabricated during conferences held in Europe by the colonial powers. Their desire was simply to be rid of the yoke of foreign domination. It fell to SWAPO, in the 1960s and 1970s, to unite the various tribal and other groupings in a national struggle. Not to acknowledge this is to detract from what is arguably one of SWAPO's greatest achievements as a movement.

Some of the contributions are, in places, a little disjointed, with the writing lacking flow making it difficult to follow – possibly due to the author not expressing himself in his home language. There is also a tendency to accept Russian and Cuban viewpoints as fact, while being almost arrogantly dismissive of SADF claims. Perhaps reminiscent of 'the victor in a war writes the history'.

Regarding resistance to conscription, which constitutes the longest chapter in the book, the point appears to be missed that most citizens in any society object to being conscripted. This has nothing to do with conscience, but everything to do with the inconvenience of being deprived of one's comfort zone and a dislike of having one's freedom curtailed by being subjected to military discipline. In most of the works on conscientious objection in South Africa, this truth is generally glossed over in the efforts to reflect resistance to apartheid aggression. This bestows on the average white conscript an unearned 'badge of honour'. There does, however, appear to have been an increased reluctance to serve when soldiers were deployed in the townships.

This chapter deserves a review on its own, but as has been stated, the subject warrants a book on its own. Suffice to say, there appears to have been almost no archival research done on resistance to conscription. Almost everything in the chapter is based on secondary sources, making the figures somewhat suspect. There must surely be accurate figures on numbers called up, numbers who reported, numbers of conscientious objectors, courts martial, sentences imposed, desertions and so on in the official archives. It is a fallow field, waiting to be ploughed, but will require a stern and dogged ploughman.

It is always difficult to decide what to include in an index, and this book has a good and very useful one. However, it was disappointing that it did not include the various armament types referred to so frequently in the text. In the same vein, it would have been useful to indicate, during references to UN Resolutions, whether these were resolutions of the General Assembly or of the Security Council. Only those of the latter were considered binding.

In conclusion, I would recommend this book to anyone who seriously desires to have a better understanding of the Southern African Thirty-Year War, and specifically the campaign in Angola after the Portuguese departure. It gives viewpoints that have been conveniently ignored by many writers, and though many participants in the war, and even scholars of the war, may take issue with some of what the book contains, it certainly provides some much-needed balance. Broad perspective and proper contextualisation are often the vital factors missing in most military and even war history that covers contemporary periods. This book will help to provide that for those whose reading on the war might have perforce been one-sided.

Whereas many who have written at length and often with great passion of battles and campaigns in Southern Africa, have tried hard to portray a military victory by one side or the other, the truth, as is often the case, is difficult to pin down. World events have a profound effect on local conflicts, just as local conflicts

contribute towards world events. In the words of Professor Phil Eidelberg, one of the contributors in this book:

In Angola, as in the Horn of Africa, the USSR and its Cuban allies would end up in a series of inconclusive land battles during the late 1970s and 1980s which would sap the economic strength of the Soviet Bloc. In turn, these land battles also drained the resources of an increasingly isolated government in South Africa.

What this important book does above all else is to make serious readers of military history aware of the need for a concise volume on the entire Southern African Thirty-Year War, encompassing all the campaigns and major clashes, reflected from both sides and providing a contextual international background. A major undertaking indeed!

¹ *Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angola* (the Popular Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola), the armed forces of the MPLA (*Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*), the Marxist movement that seized power in Angola in 1975 and continues to govern the country today.

² People's Liberation Army of Namibia, the armed wing of SWAPO (South West African People's Organisation), the organisation that opposed South African occupation of Namibia and that was voted into power in the country's first elections. It has continued to win every election, and remains the governing party in the country.