

## *Book Review*

# **The SADF and Cuito Cuanavale: A tactical and strategic analysis**

*Leopold Scholtz*

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Few authors dare to take on topics relating to the so-called ‘Border War’. There are several reasons for this; indeed, the name of the conflict is, in itself, problematic and not universally accepted.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, most South African military historians agree that research into pre-1970s topics is significantly easier than later topics. This is simply because of a blanket declassification policy on all documents dated earlier than 1970. Gaining access to documents with a later date, while not impossible, is decidedly more challenging.<sup>3</sup> The Border War started, theoretically, in 1966 and in earnest in 1975, meaning that almost all documents relating to it fall in the latter category.

Leopold Scholtz, however, seems unfazed by the complications associated with Border War research. He churns out literature on the topic at quite an impressive rate.<sup>4</sup> For this alone, he deserves credit. In a global library largely devoid of academic Border War literature, scholars should welcome any new additions, even before starting their reading. Any criticism levelled at such literature should therefore be juxtaposed with the value that it adds simply by being available. If authors like Scholtz also chose the easier route and focused on earlier South African military history, serious Border War literature simply would not exist. Memoires, of course, abound, but these fill a different niche from academic studies and analyses.<sup>5</sup>

In the author’s note to his latest offering, Scholtz explains that he had originally envisaged *The SADF and Cuito Cuanavale* as two books: “the role played by the town of Cuito Cuanavale in the strategic, operational and tactical planning of the SADF” followed by “a professional tactical study of six selected battles of the campaign”.<sup>6</sup> At the suggestion of his publisher, he decided to consolidate the two books into a much “chopped and changed” single volume.<sup>7</sup> This goes some way towards explaining the somewhat misleading title of the book.

The title, *The SADF and Cuito Cuanavale: A tactical and strategic analysis*, seems to place the book in the realms of military strategy rather than military history. While these disciplines are, of course, interrelated, *The SADF and Cuito Cuanavale* reads more like history than like strategy. Scholtz's historiography tends to be operationally focused, somewhere between the strategic and tactical focus promised by the subtitle of the book, with interspersed references to the latter two spheres. This does not detract from the value or the readability of the book, but the operational focus runs the risk of disappointing strategic or tactical purists.

As the title suggests, *The SADF and Cuito Cuanavale* focuses on the series of battles that took place late in the Border War known in the SADF as Operations Modular, Hooper and Packer. Scholtz discusses the operations in a logical, chronological way. The microstructure of the book echoes the macrostructure. For the most part, each chapter starts with a summary of the SADF's planning for a particular phase of the war, then describes the events of the phase, and finally analyses those events from the perspective of both the SADF and their opponents. The book itself follows a similar pattern: it examines the reasons for the SADF entering Angola in 1987 in the first place, discusses their deployments, and analyses the battle (or rather series of battles) as a whole. All of this is interspersed with simplified discussions of military strategy, which are easily digestible, even for readers who are not necessarily students of military science. It is similarly easy to follow the development of the campaign and to put events into context. On the whole, *The SADF and Cuito Cuanavale* is well written and makes for a good read.

The greatest strength of *The SADF and Cuito Cuanavale* is possibly Scholtz's transparent methodology throughout the book. In addition to comprehensive referencing, he makes his approach clear in the introduction and sustains it. He acknowledges his background as a soldier in the SADF and, while critical of opposing viewpoints, consistently engages with them. Scholtz tries to adhere to his father's maxim of not becoming "victim of his own subjective feelings when he takes up the pen",<sup>8</sup> and invites readers to decide whether he succeeds. Arguments may be put forward both in favour of and against his success in this regard, but his honesty cannot be denied. This is, perhaps, best illustrated on p. 109, where he openly acknowledges that one of his suggestions in an earlier publication "now seems incorrect".<sup>9</sup>

A second invaluable contribution of *The SADF and Cuito Cuanavale* can be found in Scholtz's excellent source analysis in the final chapter of the book. Although the chapter is titled "The political and academic debate", Scholtz essentially examines in this chapter the foundations on which arguments around Operations Modular, Hooper and Packer are based. Scholtz excels in his 21-page analysis of all the major contributions to the debate about the latter phase of the Border War. The chapter sets a benchmark for engaging with and challenging existing literature, while remaining cognisant of one's own limitations.

While *The SADF and Cuito Cuanavale* is well worth acquiring, a review of the book would not be complete without pointing out some, admittedly rather minor, points

of criticism. Scholtz claims that his research, in contrast to almost all other existing Border War research, was focused on primary sources, mostly documents in the SANDF Documentation Centre. Early in his book, he makes the entirely believable claim that he has seen “many” documents relating to Cuito Cuanavale at the Centre.<sup>10</sup> This claim becomes quite extravagant towards the latter part of the book, where he claims, referring to archival documents relating to Operations Handbag and Prone, “I have seen them all.”<sup>11</sup> This statement will be met with disbelief by any researcher familiar with the workings of the SANDF Documentation Centre. A glance at the bibliography of the book does nothing to alleviate this disbelief – despite his claimed reliance on archival sources, Scholtz only refers to two archival groups (the JF Huyser Collection and the Chief of the SADF group, no. 4), containing 18 boxes and some 30 different files.<sup>12</sup> While this comprises considerably more information than referred to by most other Border War historiographers, it falls a long way short of “them all”. Nonetheless, Scholtz’s transparency does him credit: his referencing is complete and professional. Readers are free to analyse the basis of his arguments throughout the book and given the information to do so. This stands in stark contrast to the overwhelming majority of Border War literature.

At some points, Scholtz’s interpretation of military abbreviations may be called into question. An example of this can be found on p. 134, where he quotes an archival document, “All en[emy] def[ined] localities will be protected by mines ...” and later “... the ability to switch def[inition] direction”.<sup>13</sup> In both cases, an alternative, and more commonly used, interpretation of “def” could be “defensive”. It should be noted that Scholtz is, once again, completely transparent where he adds his own interpretation. While these interpretations do not detract from Scholtz’s argument, his proclaimed reliance on primary sources suffers somewhat when potential doubts arise over the interpretation of those sources.

The most jarring aspect of Scholtz’s writing is his rating of different battles during the campaign. From p. 180–185, Scholtz assigns marks to both the SADF and their opponents, FAPLA, based on “conventional principles of war”, for the six major battles of the campaign. While the desire to quantify the performance of the two opposing forces in order to determine a “victor” is understandable, Scholtz could have made his point – that the SADF had the upper hand during the early part of the campaign, but relinquished the initiative to FAPLA later on – through continued use of his prosaic skills. This would have seemed much less arbitrary.

*The SADF and Cuito Cuanavale* is a welcome addition to the corpus of Border War literature. Scholtz’s scientific, transparent approach to a controversial topic does him credit. The library of any serious scholar of the Border War, and even military science in general, will be enriched by Scholtz’s latest book.

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Will Gordon holds a PhD in history from Stellenbosch University. He has an interest in the Cold War in Africa, the wars for Southern Africa, and the South African involvement in the world wars. He currently teaches high school history.
- <sup>2</sup> Cf. G Baines. *South Africa's 'Border War': Contested narratives and conflicting memories*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014, 1–4 for a discussion of the various names by which South Africa's involvement in Namibia and Angola has come to be known. For the purpose of this review, Scholtz's preferred term 'Border War' will be used.
- <sup>3</sup> Cf. E Kleynhans & W Gordon. "Legislative disconnect or institutional gatekeeping? Challenges of researching South Africa's military past". *Scientia Militaria* 48/1. 2020 for a discussion of the challenges of research into post-1970s topics.
- <sup>4</sup> Cf., inter alia, L Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War, 1966–1989*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2013; L Scholtz, *Ratels on the Lomba: The story of Charlie squadron*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2017.
- <sup>5</sup> For better examples of wider Border War memoirs, cf., inter alia, P Nortje. *The terrible ones: A complete history of 32 Battalion*. Cape Town: Zebra, 2012; J Geldenhuys. *We were there: Winning the war for southern Africa*. Pretoria: Kraal, 2011; A Feinstein. *Battle scarred: Hidden costs of the Border War*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2011; C Nqakula. *The people's war: Reflections of an ANC cadre*. Johannesburg: Mutloatse Arts Heritage Trust, 2017.
- <sup>6</sup> L Scholtz. *The SADF and Cuito Cuanavale: A tactical and strategic analysis*. Johannesburg: Delta Books, 2020, xx.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. vii–viii.
- <sup>8</sup> GD Scholtz, as cited in *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 265–266.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134. Parenthesis original.