South Africa's War, and the Cuban Military, in Angola

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South Africa’s War, and the Cuban Military, in Angola


A serious general study of any war requires that it should be viewed from both, or all, sides. The three books under review make new and important contributions to our knowledge of the war that South Africa fought in northern Namibia and Angola in the 1970s and 1980s and the relevant context, but approach the war from very different and partial perspectives.

There is no agreement on what to call the war, let alone its significance or why it came to an end when it did. Initially, white South Africans merely talked of ‘the operational area’, but by the late 1970s, grensoorlog, translated from the Afrikaans as ‘border war’, was the term most commonly used, sometimes vaguely for all South Africa’s northern borders but more often narrowed to a particular border, not of South Africa but between South African-occupied Namibia and Angola. As the zone of fighting became wider than the border area some spoke of ‘the bush war’, which also did not indicate who was involved or where,1 others of ‘the Angolan war’. Angola was where all the major battles took place, in a war that became increasingly conventional, until South African troops finally withdrew into Namibia, for the last time, in 1988, but to call it the Angolan war is problematic, for a civil war continued there that was in some respects linked to, but in others separate from, South Africa’s war.

South Africa’s military involvement in Angola flowed, at root, from its failure, in alliance with the Portuguese,2 to stamp out the armed activity of the South West Africa People’s Organisation (SWAPO) in northern Namibia in the late 1960s and early 1970s. South African forces advanced deep into Angola in late 1975 in an attempt to influence who would come to power in Luanda. The South African invasion was unsuccessful, thanks to Cuban military intervention.3 South African involvement in Angola then continued after the Movement for the Popular Liberation of Angola (MPLA) was installed as the new government of Angola in Luanda; for the MPLA in different ways aided SWAPO’s armed struggle to end South Africa’s occupation of Namibia and to come to power there, and until the late 1980s the South African government was determined to prevent SWAPO achieving its goals, and for that reason waged a major war in southern Angola. In seeking to defeat SWAPO’s armed struggle, South Africa found an

1 ‘Grensoorlog’ became ‘Bush War’ in, for example, the title of the 26-part documentary series first broadcast on Kyknet and now available on DVD in both English and Afrikaans (Nu Metro, 2011). ‘Bush War’ was also used in relation to the Rhodesian war; much of the country in northern Namibia and southern Angola was open savannah, with few bushes. Examples of recent usage include Richard Dale, ‘A Comparative Reconsideration of the Namibian Bush War, 1966–89’, Small Wars and Insurgencies, 18, 2, June 2007, pp. 196–215; John Liebenberg and Patricia Hayes, Bush of Ghosts: Life and War in Namibia, 1986–90 (Cape Town, Umuzi, 2010); Gennady Shubin and Andrei Tokarev (eds.), Bush War: The Road to Cuito Cuanavale. Soviet Soldiers’ Accounts of the Angolan War (Auckland Park, Jacana Media, 2011).


3 One of the earliest accounts of this ‘great victory’ was Gabriel García Márquez, ‘Operation Carlota’, New Left Review, 101–102, January 1977.
ally in the Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). The Angolan army – the Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angola (FAPLA) – and the Cubans fought to resist South Africa’s military aggression, defeat UNITA and assist SWAPO.

These three books are not concerned with all the complexities, but primarily with South Africa’s war in Angola, Cuba’s military presence there, and the ramifications of these two aspects. One is presented as a military history of South Africa’s war, another offers analyses of what the author calls ‘the afterlife’ of that war, while the third, Piero Gleijeses’ massive, long-awaited sequel to Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington and Africa, 1956–1976 (2002), is a work of diplomatic history relating to the war and the presence of the Cuban troops in Angola. The Cuban forces, having arrived in 1975 in response to the South African invasion, and having helped to establish the MPLA in power, stayed to help defend Angola against further South African aggression. Gleijeses presents a masterly exegesis of the lengthy and highly involved diplomatic efforts to bring the war to an end and secure the withdrawal both of the Cubans and of the South Africans, to which was linked the independence of Namibia through a process involving a United Nations (UN) presence to ensure a free and fair election. Though from 1976 to late 1987 the Cuban forces deliberately remained away from the main area of conflict in southern Angola, especially after suffering losses in an unexpected clash with the South African forces who attacked Cassinga on 4 May 1978, their presence in Angola was key, not least in helping to make the war and the associated diplomacy part of a wider Cold War struggle in Southern Africa. Gleijeses dissects the roles of the United States and the Soviet Union, alongside those of South Africa, Angola and Cuba, in relation to the Cuban forces in Angola. He explores, inter alia: the adoption by the new Reagan administration in the United States of the idea of linking Cuban troop withdrawal from Angola with South African agreement to allow the implementation of the UN Security Council’s resolution of 1978 providing for the transition to Namibian independence; the failed attempt to secure the withdrawal of the South African troops from Angola in 1984; and the significance for Angola of the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev as leader of the Soviet Union. In early 1988 the Cuban forces – now reinforced from Havana, numbering over 50,000 and including Cuban pilots who were able to gain air superiority thanks to their MIG23s – played a crucial role in transforming the military balance, which in turn boosted the process of negotiation that eventually ended the war and saw the beginning of the process leading to the independence of Namibia.

Some historiographical background is necessary to place these books in context. In the very year in which the war ended, Willem Steenkamp, a defence correspondent for the Cape Times who had himself fought in the South African Defence Force (SADF), published the first general survey of the entire war, a narrowly military and mostly descriptive account. For well over a decade thereafter, however, there was relatively little published on the war, and little public discussion of it in a South Africa then moving into its new democratic dispensation. Only in the past decade or so has there been an outpouring of memoirs and other accounts, both on paper and on the internet, by South African generals, soldiers and others, on aspects of the war. Some of these have merely recounted ‘blood and guts’ stories; some have expressed a sense of being betrayed by the politicians; some have tried to justify South African involvement in the war. But there has not been a general scholarly study of the war. That is what


6 Baines writes about some of this literature, especially in Chapters 1 and 4 of South Africa’s ‘Border War’. South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission treated some aspects of the war in the second volume of its report: see Christopher Saunders, ‘South Africa’s Role in Namibia/Angola’, in Gary Baines and Peter Vale (eds), Beyond the Border War: New Perspectives on Southern Africa’s Late Cold War Conflicts (Pretoria, Unisa Press, 2008). For a sensitive account of the war and its aftermath, which appeared after Baines completed his book, see Paul Morris, Back to Angola (Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2014).
Leopold Scholtz, who wrote for Afrikaans newspapers during the war, has now produced, a quarter of a century after the war’s end.

Scholtz’s book is based on a mass of documentary and archival material in South Africa, much of it only recently accessible. Broader in approach than its title might suggest, it concerns not only the activities of the SADF, and is in places not uncritical of its role. Scholtz’ sympathies clearly lie with the SADF, however, and his book’s overall argument is from what one can call a SADF perspective. Gary Baines, Professor of History at Rhodes University, is, by contrast, concerned with the way the war has been remembered, and the controversies it has engendered. Though this means bringing in the views of SWAPO from time to time, he also writes mainly from a South African perspective: he has chapters on the South African soldiers who have written on the war, on the continuing significance of the war for South African veterans, and on some of the South African soldiers taken prisoner in Angola. He does not tell us how the Angolans and Cubans have remembered the war (for which he would at least have had to read Portuguese and Spanish and perhaps have had to visit Angola and Cuba). The third author, Gleijeses, a Professor of International History at Johns Hopkins University, has tried to use as comprehensive a range of sources as possible, in numerous languages, and his book is based on monumental research, for he was able to obtain unique access to 15,000 relevant Cuban documents in Havana, which he uses along with a vast number of other sources, including the relatively rich South African ones, both in archives and online. Among the 150 people he interviewed are some of those South Africans whom Scholtz interviewed, but also a large number of Angolans, Namibians and others. But while his sources are extraordinary, they could not be complete, for while we now even have, say, accounts by Russian advisers in the war available in English, not all the relevant archives in Washington and Moscow are open, while those in Luanda and Windhoek remain firmly closed. There is still a dearth of literature on the involvement of Angolans in the war against South African forces, and relatively little from SWAPO’s side of the story besides the so-called autobiography of SWAPO’s leader and a few other works. For all the wealth of his sources, and the richness of his narrative, Gleijeses, as we shall see, in the end also presents a partial account, in his case from a Cuban perspective.

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After briefly tracing the origins of the war, Scholtz surprisingly skips over the South African military intervention into Angola in 1975 on the grounds that it has been covered elsewhere, and really gets going with what he calls ‘the rude shock of the failed Operation Savannah’ (p. xiv), the name the South Africans gave to their invasion. He provides an excellent analysis of the military doctrine of the SADF that emerged after the South African forces withdrew from Angola in 1976: that a defensive posture would not win the war and that a counter-offensive strategy was necessary, which meant going back into Angola. He then considers in detail the South African operations in that country between 1978 and 1984 (Reindeer, Sceptic, Protea, and Askari), before turning to the counter-insurgency operations the South Africans conducted in northern Namibia and to the way in which SWAPO became consumed by seeking out, and then detaining and in some cases killing, alleged spies. He proceeds to analyse in detail what the SADF called Operations Moduler and Hooper (part of what is usually called the battle of Cuito

7 A selection of the documents Gleijeses obtained in Havana is accessible at http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/visions-freedom-new-documents-the-closed-cuban-archives and http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/collection/173/cuba-and-southern-africa. His bibliography lists archives in 12 countries and newspapers from 17 countries. This reviewer was able to arrange to have a trunk full of key documents moved from an office in the Union Buildings to the archives of the Department of Foreign Affairs (now International Co-Operation and Development) and then had a selection of these digitised for the Aluka project: www.aluka.org.

8 For example, Shubin and Tokarev (eds), Bush War; G. Shubin, I. Zhdarkin, V. Barabulya and A. Kuznetsova-Timonova (eds), Cuito Cuanavale: Frontline Accounts by Soviet Soldiers (Auckland Park, Jacana Media, 2014).

9 Even the website of the Swapo Party Archive and Research Centre (SPARC) in Windhoek, where the SWAPO archive is housed, has disappeared.

Cuanavale) in 1987–88. He sees the first phase of Modular as a ‘decisive victory’ for South Africa but ‘not a knockout’, and the war as ending in 1988 in a draw (pp. 277, 456). He has little to say about the battles in northern Namibia in April 1989, in which more than 300 SWAPO fighters were killed by the South African security forces. For him the war was not primarily fought by South Africa to defend apartheid and colonial domination, but to prevent the revolution that SWAPO and its allies aimed to bring about, first in Namibia and then in South Africa, for he believes that SWAPO’s agenda for Namibia was ‘a dictatorship with no room for an opposition or deviant thinking’ (p. 457). The prolongation of the war for another decade after 1978 meant that ‘the SADF bought time for a better and more durable peace to ripen’ (p. 97). Only with the collapse of communism and the ending of the Cold War could the South African government ‘afford to give up its monopoly on power’, allowing ‘a compromise’ to be reached that would allow for ‘freedom and democracy’ (pp. 457–8). By then, he claims, SWAPO’s capacity to wage an effective war had been broken, in part because of the ‘spy scandal’ that had engulfed it.

Much of this is, of course, highly controversial. Scholtz ignores other currents in SWAPO: many of those who fought in its People’s Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) were Christians, and many leading figures in SWAPO retained a Western, liberal-democratic orientation while paying lip-service to those who supplied the weaponry to fight the armed struggle. Any settlement reached earlier would necessarily have had to involve compromise. That the SWAPO government in power since 1990 has not introduced any revolutionary changes, such as nationalising the mines and moving towards socialism, and that Namibia remains formally a liberal, multi-party democracy, does not mean, as Scholtz suggests in his final chapter, that the SADF was justified in continuing to fight until such an outcome eventuated. We cannot of course know for sure what would have happened had the war ended ten years earlier, but that it continued for much of the 1980s in southern Angola and northern Namibia was devastating for the people of those regions.

Let us now turn to South Africa’s ‘Border War’. Baines was the lead editor of a collection of essays titled Beyond the Border War, published in 2008. In his new book, which reads almost as a set of essays lightly stitched together and put into a general framework of how wars are remembered, he is mainly concerned with ways in which South Africa’s war in Angola and northern Namibia has been memorialised. As his title suggests, he explores this almost entirely from the perspective of the white South Africans who fought in that war. He goes into most detail when he discusses a range of controversies around two key moments in the war in Angola and one in northern Namibia: Cassinga (4 May 1978); ‘Cuito Cuanavale’ (1987–88), which he prefers to see as the last phase of South Africa’s war in Angola; and the massacre of PLAN combatants in April 1989, the controversy over why that happened having been reignited by the discovery of mass graves in 2005. He also has a chapter on the dispute over Freedom Park in Pretoria, where the names of the more than 2,000 Cubans who died in Angola are inscribed but not those of white South Africans who died in that war (their names are on another memorial not far away but now very little visited). Baines makes only a passing reference to Heroes Acre in Windhoek and to an ‘official Namibian narrative of the war of liberation’ (pp. 126, 103), and does not refer at all to how the Angolans have remembered South Africa’s war of aggression, say through the objects now displayed from captured South Africans in the Museu Militar in Luanda’s São Miguel Fort,11 or to the Cubans. Though he draws analogies between the ‘Border War’ and the Vietnam war (South African troops in Angola and northern Namibia used ‘Nam’ and ‘the States’ for South West Africa and South Africa), there is much more to do in this vein.

Baines welcomes contestations over the past, and concludes his book by saying that he hopes that it will not help to end such contestations but will ‘further conflictual dialogue rather than [promote] consensus’ (p. 193). At one point he writes that in his view what happened is less significant than how it is remembered (p. 100), which seems to me to duck what should be the historian’s task, which is to aim for the truth and to assess, from the evidence, the most likely version of what happened. As he presents the various controversies over what happened in the war, I looked for him to say which were most convincing, but he rarely does this, allowing himself only at one point to say, rightly, that ‘claims that the SADF made possible a better peace or helped establish freedom and democracy in South Africa are risible’ (p. 30).

11 My thanks to Jeremy Ball of Dickinson College, who is writing on memorialisation of wars in Angola.
Gleijeses, by contrast, does not hesitate to make his point of view clear in his long, richly detailed, yet highly readable book. There is no space here to discuss many of the topics he tackles, such as, for example, relations between the Cubans and the Angolans or the Cubans and the Soviets, and the making of American policy in Southern Africa, but in recounting the remarkable role played by the Cubans in Angola in 1975–76 and again in 1987–88, he shows convincingly that the Cubans acted independently of the Soviet Union and with highly significant effect. The South Africans, on the other hand, in the end failed to secure the goal for which they had long fought: preventing SWAPO from coming to power in Namibia. But Gleijeses’s book is marred by a lack of balance: while he is harshly critical of South Africa and the United States in particular, he is full of praise for Cuba. He sometimes writes in exaggerated terms: to take just two examples, he writes of Cuban soldiers ‘routing the South Africans’ at Cassinga in 1978 (p. 269), and of South Africa in late 1988 having ‘decided to fold’ (p. 487).

With hindsight, it is of course obvious that the apartheid government’s fears of ‘a communist onslaught’, in which Cuban and perhaps other forces would somehow take over first Namibia, then South Africa, were groundless, but Gleijeses does not adequately set those fears in the Cold War context of the time, with regimes that proclaimed themselves Marxist-Leninist having come to power in both Angola and Mozambique and when a large Cuban force was stationed in Angola. Gleijeses believes the South African government, which he sometimes sees in too monolithic terms, not only wanted to prevent the MPLA coming to power in 1975 and into the 1980s, but wished to topple it and replace it with a government headed by Savimbi of UNITA. This was what the Angolans and their Cuban allies feared. There is no doubt that the SADF wanted to weaken the Angolan government, to prevent it giving support to SWAPO – the commando raid on the Cabinda oil installations in 1985 is the clearest example of this – but that is not the same as working for regime change, when the MPLA government was backed by Cuban troops. Meanwhile, South Africa’s Department of Foreign Affairs, which remained more significant in the 1980s than Gleijeses allows, continued to work for a negotiated settlement with Angola. For a time in early 1984 it seemed that such a settlement might be possible, with the signing of the Lusaka accord, but another four years were to pass before the issue of the withdrawal of the Cuban forces from Angola began to be seriously addressed.

If Baines ever brings out a new edition of his book, he will be able to say much more about the contestation over ‘Cuito Cuanavale’ by contrasting in detail what Scholtz and Gleijeses say in their books under review. On the arrival of Cuban forces to turn the tide there in late 1987, and the subsequent conflict in 1988, Gleijeses should be read along with other sources, in particular the very impressive article by Edgar Dosman, itself based on some Cuban sources. Gleijeses writes repeatedly of a Cuban ‘victory’ in Angola in 1988 that forced Pretoria to set Namibia free, but, as Scholtz shows (Chapters 14 and 15), though the Cubans dramatically altered the military balance of power, there was no military victory as such, in the sense of a rout of the South African forces. Though the Cuban attack on the Calueque dam in late June 1988 helped to concentrate the minds of the South African negotiators at the Cairo meeting between the parties, the SADF, even though it was now also involved in trying to keep order in the townships in South Africa itself, retained the capacity to defeat an attempt by the Cubans to move into Namibia. With the winding down of the Cold War, South Africa was no longer worried about a SWAPO victory in a democratic election in Namibia, provided SWAPO did not gain more than the two-thirds of the seats in the Constituent Assembly that would write a new constitution for that country, and provided the Cuban troops left Angola. In the negotiations, the South African government secured the major concession from Angola that the ANC’s military bases in that country would be closed. Certainly it is the case that Castro, seizing an opportunity in late 1987/early 1988, helped to make the New York Namibia/Angola agreements of December 1988 possible, but Gleijeses overemphasises the Cuban role in bringing about the end of South Africa’s occupation of Namibia, let alone in ending apartheid in South Africa. That a book on the Cuban role, based largely on Cuban

documents, should emphasise the Cuban role is perhaps not surprising, but in my view the winding down of the Cold War and the changed situation in South Africa itself deserve at least equal weight.

In Conclusion

These books, then, approach overlapping topics from different perspectives. This is not to say that on some issues they do not reach similar conclusions. Though Scholtz is often critical of Gleijeses (based on what he said in his earlier writings), he accepts that Fidel Castro’s strategy in 1987–88 was brilliant, and that he seized the opportunity presented to him in November 1987 to send reinforcements to Angola and to use them to help bring the war to an end. All agree that in the final phase of the Angolan war the battles around Cuito Cuanavale itself were but one aspect of the conflict and that the drive of joint FAPLA–Cuban units to the south-west was the key factor in altering the balance of power in the war. All agree, say, that Operation Reindeer, the attack on Cassinga, was a propaganda disaster for South Africa. While all edge towards accepting that Cassinga was both a refugee settlement and a SWAPO military base, however, what was for Scholtz a successful raid, which dealt SWAPO a major military blow, is, for Gleijeses, a massacre, designed to keep SWAPO from agreeing to the UN plan for a transition to independence for Namibia. Baines shows that such opposing views are not new, and that the controversy over the event itself, and its place in the war, go back almost to the immediate aftermath.

These books contribute to knowledge in different ways. For example, Baines has a chapter on the eight SADF soldiers captured by the Cubans and held from 1975 until 1978, a topic not addressed by Gleijeses, who does not recognise the significance of the prisoner swap that occurred a decade later, when Johan Papenfus of the SADF was exchanged for three Cuban soldiers and eleven members of FAPLA. Scholtz mentions diplomatic efforts for peace that Gleijeses does not, such as those in 1988 in which the South African diplomat John Mare was involved, and devotes more attention than Gleijeses to the Cuban fear of the possible use of nuclear artillery by South Africa in southern Angola in 1987–88 (pp. 382–4). Gleijeses, on the other hand, presents what is now by far the most integrated survey of the lengthy diplomatic activity relating to the war, thereby putting the war into a far fuller context than Scholtz. While his book stands out from the others for the richness of its detail and the compelling way in which it is written, and will doubtless retain a central place in the relevant literature, these three books deserve to be read together, as constituting different parts of a jigsaw that will one day, it is to be hoped, form a comprehensive history of the war and the related diplomacy.

Inevitably perspectives will continue to differ, but as time passes and more of the jigsaw is filled in, it is likely that some of the different interpretations will be shown to be wrong and that more consensus will emerge. As long as the limitations of the available sources, mentioned above, remain, it may not be possible to write such a history, but Scholtz is of course right to say that ‘as further sources become public, the picture will become even fuller and more nuanced’ (p. ix). All three books benefit from the perspective of distance that we now have from the events they are concerned with, but none is a definitive account of its subject-matter, and none sees the war from all sides.

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14 Baines does not explain how their release was achieved or justify his assertion that their capture had a ‘profound impact on the consciousness of the South African public’ (p. 81).