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**From Soweto To Cuito Cuanavale:**  
**Cuba, the War in Angola and the End of Apartheid**

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**Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD in History**  
**2014**

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## **ABSTRACT**

There are unresolved issues concerning the 1987-88 military conflict in Angola, specifically the battle of Cuito Cuanavale and the role of Cuba. This particular aspect of southern African history is highly controversial and politicized. The original contribution of this dissertation is to provide a detailed scholarly treatment and analysis of the battle of Cuito Cuanavale, drawing from an array of different sources, some of which were not previously available.

Cuito Cuanavale is a controversial subject because the outcome and consequences continue to be disputed among the principal protagonists. Arrayed on one side were the armed forces of Cuba, Angola and the South West African People's Organization, on the other, the South African Defense Force, military units of the Union for the Total National Independence of Angola and the South West African Territorial Force of Pretoria-controlled Namibia. By drawing on South African, Cuban, United States documents and other sources, and placing the 1987-88 military engagement in the context of South African military regional intervention, this dissertation elaborates Cuba's role in the conflict and attempts to resolve the questions and disputes surrounding the competing interpretations of the military nature and political ramifications for the apartheid regime of the battle of Cuito Cuanavale.



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## **LIST OF ACROYNMS**

ANC - African National Congress

BCM – Black Consciousness Movement

BPC – Black Peoples’ Convention

CIA – Central Intelligence Agency (U.S)

CP – Conservative Party (South Africa)

COSATU – Congress of South African Unions

ECC - End Conscription Campaign

FAPLA - Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angola

FAR - Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (Cuba)

FNLA - Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola

FRELIMO - Frente de Libertação de Moçambique

MK - Umkhonto we Sizwe

MPLA - Movimento Popular da Libertação de Angola

NP – National Party (South Africa)

NIS – National Intelligence Service (South Africa)

NSMS - National Security Management System

NUM- National Union of Mineworkers

PAC - Pan-Africanist Congress

PCC - Partido Comunista de Cuba

PLAN - People’s Liberation Army of Namibia

PTSS - Post-traumatic Stress Syndrome

RSA – Republic of South Africa

SAAF - South African Air Force

SACP - South African Communist Party

SACTU - South African Congress of Trade Unions



SADF – South African Defense Force

SANDF – South African National Defence Force

SASO - South African Students' Organization

SSC – State Security Council (South Africa)

SWAPO - South West Africa People's Organization

SWATF - South African Territorial Force

TRC – Truth and Reconciliation Commission

UDF - United Democratic Front

UNITA - União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola

USDIA – United States Defence Intelligence Agency



## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION: WHY CUITO CUANAVALÉ?

Cuba's contribution to the southern African anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggle is a relatively neglected arena. The major exceptions are Piero Gleijeses' *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington and Africa, 1959-1976* and Edward George's *The Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965-1991: From Che Guevara to Cuito Cuanavale*.<sup>1</sup> A significant historiographical lacuna concerns Cuba's subsequent role in southern Africa, particularly the 1987-88 military engagements at Cuito Cuanavale. Several scholars have asserted the significance of these military events in Angola to Namibian independence and, in some cases, to the dissolution of apartheid.

However, with the notable exception of George's *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, no in-depth study exists. In most studies the 1987-88 conflict in Angola is either ignored or allocated only a few sentences, paragraphs or pages. This dissertation seeks to address this gap by providing a detailed treatment and analysis of Cuito Cuanavale and Cuba's role, endeavouring to resolve the questions and disputes surrounding the military and political nature of the engagement, in addition to its consequences for the apartheid regime. The central research focus is the battle of Cuito Cuanavale, which occurred in southeastern Angola, and lasted from late 1987 to the middle of 1988.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> P. Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington and Africa, 1959-1976* (Chapel Hill, 2001) and E. George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965-1991: From Che Guevara to Cuito Cuanavale* (London, 2005)

<sup>2</sup> The proposed research project builds on and augments previous work. See I. Saney, *African Stalingrad: The Cuban revolution, internationalism and the end of Apartheid*, *Latin American Perspectives*, 33:5 (2006), 81-117, and I. Saney, *Cuba: A Revolution In Motion* (London, 2004), 191-6



Cuito Cuanavale was the largest military engagement in Africa since the North African battles of the Second World War.<sup>3</sup> Arrayed on one side were the armed forces of Cuba (FAR), Angola (FAPLA) and the South West African People's Organization (SWAPO). On the other side was the South African Defense Force, military units of the Union for the Total National Independence (UNITA) of Angola (the South African supported insurgency) and the South African Territorial Force (SWATF) of Pretoria-controlled Namibia.

**Map1: Southern Angola, with Cuito Cuanavale highlighted.**<sup>4</sup>



<sup>3</sup> H. Campbell, Cuito Cuanavale, in M.E. Crahan et al., (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World* (New York, 2001), 187; T. Collelo, *Angola: A Country Study* (Washington, 1991), 205; D. O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years: The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party, 1948-1994* (Athens, Ohio, 1996), 377; A. G. Pazzanita, The Conflict Resolution Process in Angola, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 29:1 (1991), 83-114

<sup>4</sup> Source: <http://monthlyreview.org/2013/04/01/the-military-defeat-of-the-south-africans-in-angola>



The battle is a controversial and contentious subject, with its outcome and consequences disputed among the principal protagonists. What is not in dispute; however, is the central role that Cuba played in the events that unfolded in Cuito Cuanavale. All sides agree that Havana provided significant reinforcements, war materiel and planning. Thus, a corollary of the dispute is the portrayal of the battle as either a major victory or defeat for the foreign policy of the Cuban Revolution.

This introductory chapter will establish why Cuito Cuanavale is a legitimate subject of inquiry and will outline the current controversy and the treatment of the military engagement in academic discourse. The context in which Cuito Cuanavale was embedded is elaborated by examining newspaper coverage, the impact inside South Africa, regional developments in 1974-76, Pretoria's adoption of the policy of military intervention, and the regional impact of the wars destabilization.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

A principal research question taken up in this dissertation is: What was the significance of Cuito Cuanavale in the end of apartheid? An assessment of the military outcome and political consequences of Cuito Cuanavale engages a series of corollary questions: What role did Cuba play? What were each side's military objectives? Were these objectives attained or frustrated? In political terms: What was the politically acceptable level of casualties on both sides? Finding the answer to these questions involves exploring the issues of causalities, the impact on SADF soldiers, equipment losses and the battle for air supremacy.

In political and geo-strategic terms: What were the strategic and political objectives of each side? How was U.S. policy towards South Africa affected? What was the economic impact of the battle? Entwined with the study of Cuito Cuanavale is the determination of what was at stake for Pretoria and how the battle for Cuito Cuanavale



interacted with the Botha regime's regional strategy? What were the ramifications for the internal dynamics of the Botha regime and the apartheid state? How Cuito Cuanavale was experienced inside South Africa is examined by assessing its influence on white and black South Africans.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This dissertation draws primarily on archival material, memoirs, and interviews conducted in South Africa, Cuba, England and the United States. The interviews with persons directly involved in the events discussed were of particular importance. Despite the limitations of oral history, important insights and interpretations were obtained. Official documents were also obtained from Cuba, South Africa and the United States. Two declassified reports of particular interest were the United States Defence Intelligence Agency's *Briefing Regarding Developments in the Military Situation in Angola since July 1987* and *The 1987-88 Combat in Southern Africa: Lessons Learned*, which provide insight into Washington's views on the 1987-88 conflict.

During a three-week research trip to Cuba in April/May 2006, 15 people were interviewed, including several soldiers who served in Angola, specifically at Cuito Cuanavale, and an active participant in the southern African liberation struggles, now living in Cuba. The Embassy of Cuba in the United Kingdom, the Cuban Institute for Friendship with the Peoples and the Internal Press centre facilitated my research on the island by providing letters of introduction. I conducted research at the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, headquarters of the Communist Party of Cuba, Granma head office (the main Cuban national newspaper), National Library, and the Organization of Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Besides surveying various Cuban official publications, documents and newspapers, several memoirs of Cuban soldiers who fought in Angola were obtained. One of the most



interesting and important Cuban documents accessed was *Preparación Martiana, Marxista-Leninista para el personal de las FAR: Segundo periodo de instrucción año 2005*. This is a document produced by the Cuban armed forces solely for its own internal purposes. It contains the most detailed official Cuban treatment of the war in Angola, especially Cuito Cuanavale.

Cuban state institutions closely guard and control access to their archives. While, I was able to obtain various materials from various Cuban institutions, I was not able to access certain documents from the highest levels of the Cuban government, particularly minutes of the Politburo of the Communist Party for Cuba for the 1987-88 period. This would have required special clearance and authorization from the top echelons of the Cuban leadership. However, I was allowed to make notes from and in some cases digitally photograph the documents I requested and did receive. The exception was the personal diary of an SADF soldier that the Cubans found at the Angolan town of Calueque. Photography, photocopying and written notes were not permitted.

The documents provided appeared to be complete and not tampered with or redacted. There were no indications of alterations or selective censorship. Also, during my research trip I was allowed to travel freely and conduct my interviews. No restrictions were placed on me and no one was discouraged from speaking with me. All of my interviewees spoke freely and uninhibitedly. One person insisted on anonymity because he was an official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who was not authorized to publicly speak on the matters I interviewed him on.

During a July 22 to August 21, 2006 research visit to South Africa, several extensive interviews were conducted, and archives and libraries visited. Interviews were



conducted with 23 persons, including anti-apartheid activists from the ANC and UDF. Among those interviewed were members of *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK): Ronnie Kasrils from the MK's high command, and a current general and colonel (both of whom wished to remain anonymous) in the *South African National Defence Force*. Former members of the Botha government and the SADF were also interviewed, including several who fought in Angola in 1987-88. Of particular importance were the interviews with *Colonel Gerhard Louw* (SADF ground commander of last assault on Cuito Cuanavale) and *General Chris Thirion* (deputy director of SADF Military Intelligence and a member of Secretariat of State Security Council and frequent participant in SSC meetings).

Various archives and libraries in South Africa were accessed: *African Studies Library* (University of Cape Town); *Apartheid Museum* (Pretoria); *Foreign Affairs Archives* (South African Department of Foreign Affairs, Pretoria); *Mayibuye Centre* (University of Western Cape); *National Library of South Africa – Cape Town Branch*; *National Archives of South Africa* (Pretoria); *Trade Union Library* (Cape Town). Also, several sites were visited: *South African Defence Force Memorial*; *South African Airforce Memorial*; *South African Military Cemetery*; *South African Military Defence College*; and *Walmansdal* (a South African military base).

One of the research challenges faced was the lack of primary South African documents from the government of P.W. Botha. This lack of documents either indicated that no such documents existed or they had been concealed or destroyed. Several sources stated that as the apartheid system came to an end, records and documents related to South Africa's involvement in Angola, particularly Cuito Cuanavale, were systematically



destroyed.<sup>5</sup> However, a restricted series of documents, specifically minutes of the State Security Council, were obtained on 23 October 2006 by means of a request made through the *South African Promotion of Access to Information Act*. These minutes provide insight into discussions at the highest echelons of the Botha regime. Also, through a contact in the headquarters of the *South African National Defence Force*, one of the most informative documents was obtained: the SADF *Roll of Honour*, an extensive official list of all those who died in SADF service from 1962 to 1994, including the conflict in Angola. These documents combined with other archival work, interviews, memoirs by SADF officers and soldiers, and video materials provided a rich source of evidence upon which to draw. Frederick Bridgland's *The War for Africa: Twelve Months that Transformed a Continent* is particularly significant as a primary source as it had been officially authorized by the SADF high command and contains extensive interviews with SADF participants that were conducted in the immediate aftermath of the 1987-88 conflict in Angola.<sup>6</sup>

While, a few voices from Angola appear, the following narrative is overwhelmingly dominated by Cuba and South Africa, as they have produced the major accounts and memoirs. This is not to imply that Angolan voices and documents are not important. A planned trip to Angola was cancelled due to the collapse of research arrangements. Given time and resource limitations, a decision was made to concentrate on the research in South Africa. Nevertheless, despite relying heavily on Cuban and

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Colonel Gerhard Louw, Kimberley, 29 July 2006; Interview with Colonel Patrick Ricketts, Pretoria, 22 July 2006; Interview with SANDF general, Johannesburg, 6 August 2006 (the general wished to remain anonymous)

<sup>6</sup> F. Bridgland, *The War for Africa: Twelve Months that Transformed a Continent* (Gibraltar, 1991)



South African sources, it is possible to generate a reliable narrative, particularly as Cuba and South Africa emerge as the principal protagonists in the conflict.

The five maps in this dissertation were chosen because they were the ones that best conveyed the necessary geographical perspective framing the 1987-88 conflict. The sources for the maps are indicated in the footnotes.

## **CHAPTER STRUCTURE**

The dissertation is divided into six chapters. The aim of this introductory chapter is to establish Cuito Cuanavale as a legitimate area of research, while also establishing the context for the 1987-88 military confrontation in Angola. The chapters that follow examine the battle of Cuito Cuanavale and its ramifications, aiming to resolve several questions and disputes surrounding the military and political nature of the engagement, and the consequences for the apartheid regime.

*Chapter Two: The Road to Cuito Cuanavale* covers the events that led up to Cuito Cuanavale. After summarizing South African intervention in Angola from the 1975 invasion to the incursions throughout the 1980s, the main focus is on the period from August to November 1988, which began with the summer 1987 FAPLA offensive against UNITA, setting the stage for the SADF intervention and Havana's decision to send reinforcements. This chapter also analyzes what were the SADF objectives in Angola and how many South African soldiers were deployed. *Chapter Three: The Battle of Cuito Cuanavale* continues the narrative from Chapter Two, covering events from November 1987 to March 1988. The competing strategies employed by both sides and the size of the forces involved are discussed in both chapters, with Chapter Three examining the evaluating the competing interpretations of who won or lost the military encounter.



*Chapter Four: Aftermath: Military Consequences* examines the battle for air supremacy; the Cuban, FAPLA and SWAPO drive to Namibian border and two key military engagements, the clashes around Tchipa and the Cuban air strike against Calueque. The chapter also discusses SADF morale and the number of white casualties sustained by the South African armed forces in Angola over the course of the 1975-1988 intervention, with a specific focus on the casualties of 1987-88. In the end it assesses how the regional balance of power in the region was affected.

*Chapter Five: Aftermath: Namibia and South Africa* discusses the impact on the negotiation process leading to Namibian independence and the internal ramifications for South Africa. The economic dimensions of the conflict are analyzed, situating them within the overall economic challenges that faced South Africa. The chapter also addresses how the morale and attitudes of white South Africans to the war in Angola were affected, with an examination of the anti-war opposition and the coverage of the war in the South African media. This is followed by a discussion of the response of anti-apartheid organizations and activists.

The last chapter, *Chapter Six: Aftermath: Impact on the Botha Regime*, examines how the events in Angola affected South African ruling circles, specifically the Botha government. It also addresses the impact on Cuba. The chapter draws also some general conclusions about the role of Cuito Cuanavale in the anti-apartheid struggle and its influence on the trajectory of the apartheid regime. This assists in framing and ascertaining the contribution of this dissertation to the existing historiography.

## **LEGEND & FABLE**

The 1987-88 military confrontation in Angola remains a fiercely debated and politicized episode of southern African history; its proximity to the present adding an extra edge to the sharpness of the dispute. The 20th anniversary commemorations of the battle of



Cuito Cuanavale illustrated this ongoing contestation. A number of events were organized throughout southern Africa to mark the occasion. In Brazzaville, the Angolan and Cuban embassies jointly organized celebrations.<sup>7</sup> Namibian President Hifikepunye Pohamba awarded Namibia's highest honour, *The Order of the Most Ancient Welwitschia Mirabilis*, to Fidel Castro, declaring: "We are indebted to the Cuban Government and the heroic Cuban people for this support and we shall never forget this unparalleled example of selfless internationalism."<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, ANC President, Jacob Zuma, led a delegation at an event at Cuito Cuanavale where a commemorative monument was erected. At the event Zuma stated: "We salute all combatants who laid down their lives in Cuito Cuanavale and other parts of Angola. They paid the ultimate price so that the oppressed people of Southern Africa could be free from racism, neo-colonialism, proxy wars, and underdevelopment."<sup>9</sup>

While these activities went unchallenged in the respective countries where they occurred, inside South Africa, the actions of leading ANC politicians, however, provoked controversy and were contested. As Graeme Addison noted in an article in the *Johannesburg Business Day*, "claims and counterclaims regarding victory continue to make this one of the most controversial episodes in the story of the fall of apartheid."<sup>10</sup> A contentious dispute broke-out in the South African parliament. During the debate on

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<sup>7</sup> "Local, Cuban Embassies in Brazzaville Celebrate Cuito Cuanavale Battle", *AllAfricaGlobalMedia*, 21 March 2008, [www.allafrica.com/stories/printable/200803210378.html](http://www.allafrica.com/stories/printable/200803210378.html)

<sup>8</sup> K. Kanguenzi, Castro Gets Highest Honour, *AllAfricaGlobalMedia*, 25 March 2008, [www.allafrica.com/stories/printable/200803250368.html](http://www.allafrica.com/stories/printable/200803250368.html)

<sup>9</sup> Zuma leads ANC delegation to Cuito, *Mail and Guardian*, 22 March 2008; Zuma salutes combatants of Cuito Cuanavale, *Mail and Guardian*, 25 March 2008

<sup>10</sup> G. Addison, "Fighting Over the Memory of a Battle Nobody Won", *Business Day*, 25 February 2008



Cuito Cuanavale, Sport and Recreation Minister, Makhenkesi Stofile, declared that the SADF and its UNITA allies had been “convincingly trounced.”<sup>11</sup> Opposition MPs heckled and laughed at Stofile, with J.H. van der Merwe, of the *Inkatha Freedom Party*, dismissing Stofile’s statement as “a fable” and “untrue.”<sup>12</sup> Peter Mulder, leader of the *Freedom Front*, accused the ANC of “spreading its own propaganda.”<sup>13</sup> Ronnie Kasrils, Minister of Intelligence Services, responded for the ANC, defending the position that the SADF had suffered an unambiguous defeat. A few days after the parliamentary debate, he published in *The Sunday Independent*, “Turning point at Cuito Cuanavale,” elaborating the ANC position.<sup>14</sup> As a direct response to the 2008 celebrations, Leopold Scholtz, a researcher at Stellenbosch University, published *South African Strategic and Operational: Objectives in Angola, 1987–88*, arguing that the SADF was not defeated and statements to the contrary have no foundation.<sup>15</sup>

Kasrils’ stance reflected a consistent and frequently articulated ANC theme. Several ANC leaders have described the battle of Cuito Cuanavale as a decisive event in the dissolution of apartheid, which forced Pretoria to negotiate.<sup>16</sup> This stance has become

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<sup>11</sup> N. Mafela, “Apartheid forces vs Liberation forces in Parliament”, *The Times* (Johannesburg), 20 March 2008

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> R. Kasrils, “Turning point at Cuito Cuanavale”, *The Sunday Independent*, 23 March 2008

<sup>15</sup> L. Scholtz, *The South African Strategic and Operational: objectives in Angola, 1987–88*, *South African Journal of Military Studies*, 38: 1 (2010), 68-98

<sup>16</sup> E.g., O. Tambo, *Tambo’s Opening Address to the ANC 48<sup>th</sup> National Conference*, Durban, 2 July, 1991, [www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/or/or91-3.html](http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/or/or91-3.html)



part of ANC canon. Most prominent among these declarants was Nelson Mandela, who avowed:

The defeat of the apartheid army was an inspiration to the struggling people in South Africa! Without the defeat of Cuito Cuanavale our organizations would not have been unbanned! The defeat of the racist army at Cuito Cuanavale has made it possible for me to be here today! Cuito Cuanavale was a milestone in the history of the struggle for southern African liberation! Cuito Cuanavale has been a turning point in the struggle to free the continent and our country from the scourge of apartheid!<sup>17</sup>

Mandela's successors have continued in this vein, with Thabo Mbeki on several occasions echoing those sentiments.<sup>18</sup> On 9 December 2010, during a visit to Cuba, President Zuma announced the cancellation of Cuba's US\$137 million (£86m) debt to South Africa, taking the opportunity to hail the "Cubans' depth of internationalist feeling..."<sup>19</sup> This action was praised by South Africa's National Union of Mineworkers, stating that this gesture toward Cuba sprung from a shared "concrete struggle for freedom and liberation of the oppressed people of our country and the southern African region."<sup>20</sup> Physical monuments to the anti-apartheid struggle are also deployed in this

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<sup>17</sup> N. Mandela, *Nelson Mandela Speaks: Forging a Democratic Non-Racist South Africa* (New York, 1993), 119, 121 & 124.

<sup>18</sup> T. Mbeki, "Letter from President Thabo Mbeki: Cuba's selfless contribution to African liberation driven by a genuine and passionate humanism", *ANC Today*, 30 March – 5 April, 2001, [www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/anctoday/2001/at10.htm](http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/anctoday/2001/at10.htm); Thabo Mbeki, 'Address at the University of Havana,' 28 March 2001, [www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/2001/mbek0328.htm](http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/2001/mbek0328.htm)

<sup>19</sup> "Zuma writes off Cuba's £86m debt", *Morning Star* (London), 9 December 2010; "South Africa's Zuma Wraps Up Cuba Visit", *Latin American Herald Tribune*, 9 December 2010. See also Jacob Zuma, *Closing Address by President of the African national Congress, Comrade Jacob Zuma, at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Young Communist League National Congress, University of the North West, Mafikeng*, December 12 2010, [www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71654?oid=215044&sn=D](http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71654?oid=215044&sn=Detail&pid=71616)

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*



dispute. On the *Wall of Names* in Pretoria's *Freedom Park*, the names of 2,106 Cubans who died in Angola during the 1975-1991 Cuban military missions are inscribed.<sup>21</sup>

As noted this stance on Cuito Cuanavale is not confined to South African or ANC personalities. Former SWAPO and Namibian leader Sam Nujoma not only identified Cuito Cuanavale as crucial for Namibian independence but also claimed credit as its intellectual author. In his autobiography, he described an April 1987 meeting in Havana at which he advised President Fidel Castro to reinforce Cuban forces in Angola in order to seek a decisive military engagement with South Africa.<sup>22</sup> Within Pan-Africanist circles, Cuito Cuanavale and the Cuban role are valorized. For example, *New Africa*, self-described as the bestselling Pan African magazine, dedicated 20 pages of its April 2008 issue to a tribute to Fidel Castro, highlighting Cuba's role in defeating the South African armed forces. Castro graced the cover, with the lead story entitled "Fidel Castro: Africa's Great Friend."<sup>23</sup>

Angolan writer Ondjaki in his acclaimed semi-autobiographical novel, *Good Morning Comrades*, set the childhood escapades in Luanda of the main character, 12-year-old Ndulu, against the backdrop of the war. The Cuban presence was a central motif. Cubans were portrayed positively, performing a critical role in defending Angolan independence. *Good Morning Comrades* described toasts given to "Cuban soldiers who

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<sup>21</sup> "Media Release: Che Guevara's daughter pays homage at Freedom Park to fallen Cuban freedom fighters', *Freedom Park*, 22 October 2009, [www.freedompark.co.za/cms/index.php?searchword=cuba&ordering=newest&searchphrase=all&Itemid=42&option=com\\_search](http://www.freedompark.co.za/cms/index.php?searchword=cuba&ordering=newest&searchphrase=all&Itemid=42&option=com_search)

<sup>22</sup> S. Nujoma, *When Others Wavered: The Autobiography of Sam Nujoma* (London, 2001), 362-363.

<sup>23</sup> *New African*, No. 472, April 2008, 10-29



fell on Angolan soil...”<sup>24</sup> Towards the end of the novel, Ndulu, recounted conversations in which South Africans were described as being “scared shitless of the Cubans...”<sup>25</sup>

In Cuba the battle has assumed legendary status.<sup>26</sup> Numerous articles have appeared in the Cuban press, several documentaries have been produced and a number of memoirs have been published. Cuito Cuanavale is viewed as not only as having defended Angola from South African aggression, but also as a decisive blow against the apartheid regime. It has even earned the appellation of being the African Stalingrad of apartheid.<sup>27</sup> Fidel Castro asserted that Cuito Cuanavale “resulted in the immediate liberation of Namibia and speeded up the end of apartheid by perhaps 20 to 25 years.”<sup>28</sup> In 2005, the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Cuba’s military mission in Angola was marked by a series of official activities, culminating in a major speech by Fidel Castro that highlighted Cuito Cuanavale.<sup>29</sup> A series of articles in the Cuban press and high profile public events commemorated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ondjaki, *Good Morning Comrades* (Emeryville, Canada, 2008), 92. Ondjaki chooses to be mononymous.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 105

<sup>26</sup> Isaac Saney, *Homeland of Humanity: Internationalism within the Cuban Revolution, Latin American Perspectives*, 36: 1 (2009), 111-123

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Jorge Risquet, in D. Deutschmann (ed.), *Changing the History of Africa: Angola and Namibia* (Melbourne, 1989), 32; P. Vanneman, *Soviet Strategy in Southern Africa: Gorbachev’s Pragmatic Approach* (Stanford, 1990), 560

<sup>28</sup> F. Castro, “In Miami and Washington they are now discussing where, how, and when Cuba will be attacked”, *Granma Weekly*, May 2003

<sup>29</sup> F. Castro, *Speech at the Ceremony Commemorating the 30th Anniversary of the Cuban Military Mission in Angola and the 49th Anniversary of the landing of the Granma, Revolutionary Armed Forces Day* (Havana, 2005)

<sup>30</sup> P. Gleijeses, “Cuito Cuanavale: Donde cambió el curso de la historia en África austral”, *Granma*, 23 August 2007; P. Gleijeses, “Aniversario 20 de las conversaciones cuatipartitas: Esta vez, Cuba no pudo ser excluida por Estados Unidos”, *Granma*, 31



## CUITO CUANAVALÉ IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHY

The literature on apartheid South Africa is quite voluminous. Nevertheless, the treatment of the war in Angola, specifically Cuito Cuanavale has generally not been in-depth. As noted in the introduction, E. George's *The Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965-1991: From Che Guevara to Cuito Cuanavale* and P. Gleijeses's *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington and Africa, 1959-1976* are the two major exceptions. However, while *Conflicting Missions* provides a detailed treatment of Cuba intervention in Angola, from 1959-76, it does not cover 1987-88 and the battle of Cuito Cuanavale.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, George's *The Cuban Intervention* provides the only extensive discussion of the 1987-88 conflict and the battle of Cuito Cuanavale. *The Cuban Intervention* will be discussed in greater detail later.

In the historiography, there are four approaches to Cuito Cuanavale. First, it is simply ignored. The books and articles that do not mention or allude to the battle range from general ones on Africa to specialist works on South Africa.<sup>32</sup> Second, Cuito

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January 2008; "Homenaje en Namibia a victoria de Cuito Cuanavale", *Granma*, 19 March 2008; "Celebran XX aniversario de victoria de Cuito Cuanavale", *Granma*, 20 March 2008; "Recuerdan en China batalla de Cuito Cuanavale", *Granma*, 21 March 2008; "Honran victoria de Cuito Cuanavale en Brazzaville", *Granma*, 22 March 2008; "Victoria de Cuito Cuanavale cumplió sueños de Neto", *Granma*, 24 March 2008; Alberto Nunez Betancourt, "Cuito Cuanavale: heroísmo entre cielo y tierra", *Granma*, 24 March 2008; and "Conmemoran en Rusia victoria de Cuito Cuanavale", *Granma*, 27 March 2008

<sup>31</sup> Gleijeses will cover this period in his forthcoming book *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington and Pretoria in Southern Africa, 1976-9*.

<sup>32</sup> For example see Laurence Boule *et al.*, *Malan to De Klerk: Leadership in the Apartheid State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994); David Chanaiwa, "Southern Africa Since 1935," pp 249-281 in *Africa Since 1935: General History of Africa V. III* (Oxford and Berkley: James Currey and UNESCO, 1999); Lindsay Michie Eades, *The End of Apartheid in South Africa* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999); Dan Foster, Paul Haupt and Maresa de Beer, *The Theatre of Violence: Narratives of Protagonists in the South African Conflict* (Oxford: James Currey, 2005); R.W. Johnson, *South Africa: The First Man, The Last Nation* (London: Weidenfeld, 2004); A.



Cuanavale is often presented as a peripheral event having little significance for the subsequent trajectory of southern Africa.<sup>33</sup> The third approach represents a departure from peripheralization. Most of the scholars of this approach were involved in the anti-apartheid struggle and would be categorized as leftist (even Marxist). They extol Cuito Cuanavale as a crucial defeat for the apartheid system, decisive in realizing Namibian independence and accelerating the dissolution of apartheid.

Venacio stated that the battle was “a watershed in southern African affairs,” leading to “a new balance of power” that “accelerated the independence of Namibia,”<sup>34</sup> forcing South Africa to accept and implement United Nations resolutions on Namibia’s independence. The Mozambican journalist, Carlso Cardoso argued that the source of change in South African policy was their military defeat: “South Africa agreed to negotiate and signed the agreement on Namibian independence because it had no

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Lowenburg and W. Kaempfer, *The Origins and Demise of South African Apartheid: A Public Choice Analysis* (Ann Harbour: University of Michigan, 1998); Kathryn A. Manzo, *Domination and Social Change in South Africa: The Local Effects of Global Power* (London: Praeger, 1992); Martin J. Murray, *The Revolution Deferred: The Painful Birth of Post-Apartheid South Africa* (London: Verso, 1994); Johannes Mutshutshu Rantete, *The African National Congress and the Negotiated Settlement in South Africa* (Pretoria: J.L. van Schaik, 1998); Allister Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa: The Story of the Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (London: Mandarin, 1991); Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Patti Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle: The End of Apartheid and the Birth of the New South Africa* (London: Viking, 1997).

<sup>33</sup> E.g., C. Alden, *Apartheid’s Last Stand: The Rise and Fall of the South African Security State* (London, 1996), 236-37; W. Breytenbach, Cuito Cuanavale revisited: Same outcomes, different consequences, *African Insight*, 27:1(1997), 61-67; E. George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965-1991: From Che Guevara to Cuito Cuanavale* (London, 2005), 277; W. M. James, *A Political History of the Civil War in Angola 1974-1990*. (London, 1992), 177

<sup>34</sup> M. Venacio, Angola and Southern Africa: The Dynamics of Change, in Paul Rich (ed.), *The Dynamics of Change in Southern Africa* (New York, 1994), 175



choice.”<sup>35</sup> Victoria Brittain agreed, stating that as Cuban forces approached Namibia, South African forces were in such a perilous position that Pretoria sought to extricate their troops “without humiliation and alive.”<sup>36</sup> She underscored that “Cuba’s military actions and readiness for sacrifice changed the balance of power as years of Western diplomacy could not,” and were “the most important factor in the outcome of the negotiations.”<sup>37</sup> She further declared that Cuito Cuanavale was transformed into “a symbol across the continent that apartheid and its army were no longer invincible.”<sup>38</sup>

For Pazzanita, the South African defeat forced the apartheid regime “to make concessions that had been unimaginable only the year before.”<sup>39</sup> The defeat forced South African ruling circles to reconsider “the wisdom of continuing a war on its border.”<sup>40</sup> Tvedten concurred, arguing that Pretoria entered into negotiations because it was confronted with a serious military disaster.<sup>41</sup> Davenport stated that the result of Cuito Cuanavale and its aftermath was the virtual trapping of South African troops “thus, in

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<sup>35</sup> P. Fauvet and M. Mosse, *Carlos Cardoso: Telling the Truth in Mozambique* (Cape Town, 2003), 204

<sup>36</sup> V. Brittain, *Death of Dignity: Angola’s Civil War* (Trenton, 1998), 37

<sup>37</sup> V. Brittain, Cuba and Southern Africa, *New Left Review*, 172 (1988), 123

<sup>38</sup> Brittain, *Death*, 36

<sup>39</sup> Pazzanita, ‘The Conflict’, 103

<sup>40</sup> P. Vale *et al.* (eds.), *Security and Politics in South Africa: The Regional Dimension* (London, 2003), 71

<sup>41</sup> I. Tvedten, *Angola: Struggle for Peace and Reconstruction* (Boulder, 1997), 39-40. See also H. Campbell, ‘The Military Defeat of the South Africans in Angola’, *Monthly Review*, 40: 11(1989), 13; P. L. Moorcraft, *African Nemesis: War and Revolution in Southern Africa*, (London, 1990), 208; D. L. Sparks and D. Green, *Namibia: The Nation after Independence*, (Boulder, 1990), 32 and 35



effect forcing the South African government to negotiate.”<sup>42</sup> Peter Vale posed the question regarding Namibia: “Had Castro not bolstered his troops in Angola...would the South Africans have agreed to withdraw?”<sup>43</sup> Herbstein and Evenson contended that without its defeat at Cuito Cuanavale, South Africa would have continued its occupation of Namibia, defying the UN resolutions and international law:

South Africa had no serious intention of leaving Namibia. The government had never really accepted Resolution 435...But once the SADF had invested its prestige in capturing the airfield of a remote Angolan town, and failed, the chemistry of the sub-continent changed. Like it or not, the non-victor had to abide by the rules of the game.<sup>44</sup>

Some went further, positing significant internal repercussions for apartheid. Davidson asserted that the cumulative weight of “these defeats began to take effect” inside South Africa, creating condition where “[t]he vision of a liberated south came a little closer.”<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Harvey affirmed “an entire South African armoured division had been trapped,” which generated a critical situation not only militarily but also politically by amplifying internal contradictions within South Africa, in the society, in general, and in South African ruling circles, in particular.<sup>46</sup> O’Meara described the battle “as a disaster for Pretoria,” with serious consequences for the South African government, specifically

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<sup>42</sup> T. R.H. Davenport, *South Africa: A Modern History* (Toronto, 1991), 479

<sup>43</sup> P. Vale, Crocker’s Choice: Constructive Engagement and South Africa’s People, *South Africa Journal of International Affairs*, ‘I’ (1995), 103

<sup>44</sup> D. Herbstein and J. Evenson, *The Devils Are Among Us: The War for Namibia*, (London, 1989), 175

<sup>45</sup> B. Davidson, *Africa In History: Themes and Outlines* (New York, 1991), 348

<sup>46</sup> R. Harvey, *The Fall of Apartheid: The Inside Story* (New York, 2003), 124 & 213



the political ambitions of Defence Minister Magnus Malan.<sup>47</sup> Dubow asserted that events in Angola:

proved a turning point in military and strategic thinking. A direct consequence was the government's decision to finally end South Africa's illegal occupation of Namibia from 1989...While South African power in the region was undeniably being rolled back: in addition, an important precedent for negotiated political transition was thereby established.<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, despite these assertions about the significance of military events in Angola, no sustained elaboration of those events is presented. Invariably the treatment of Cuito Cuanavale is cursory, amounting to a few sentences or, at most, a few pages. Given the competing interpretations about the military events in Angola, the brief analysis and commentary provided seems insufficient to support the interpretation that the 1987-88 military engagements had major ramifications for South Africa.

The fourth approach contradicts the third, arguing that there was no Cuban victory, often portraying the battle as a victory for the SADF in which thousands of Cubans and Angolans were killed, and South Africa sustaining sparing casualties. W. Martin James asserted that "South Africa never had any intention of deploying its troops to capture Cuito Cuanavale" and, therefore, had not put itself in a position where it could have been defeated.<sup>49</sup> Allister Sparks noted that Pretoria was able to withdraw its armed forces from Angola without "too much loss of face."<sup>50</sup> Edward George describes the

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<sup>47</sup> D. O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years: The Apartheid State and The Politics of the National Party 1948-1994* (Randburg, 1996), 377 & 398

<sup>48</sup> S. Dubow. *The African National Congress* (Gloucestershire, 2000), 97

<sup>49</sup> W. M. James, *A Political History of the Civil War in Angola 1974-1990*. (London, 1992), 177

<sup>50</sup> A. Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa: The Story of the Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (London, 1992), 313



results of the battle as “ambiguous.”<sup>51</sup> While not academic, the principal bulwarks of the fourth approach have been prominent members of the apartheid regime. Former SADF Chief of Staff, Jannie Geldenhuys, claimed in his memoirs, that the combined Cuban/Angola force had been conclusively defeated.<sup>52</sup> Magnus Malan, Minister of Defence under P.W. Botha, stated categorically that “[t]he military successes of the SADF in the late 1980s in Southern Angola paved the way for the political dispensation in South Africa” that unfolded in the 1990s.<sup>53</sup>

George’s book, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola* (based on his doctoral dissertation at the University of Bristol) is an extensive and detailed analysis of the 1987-88 conflict in Angola.<sup>54</sup> As the sections dealing with the 1987-88 conflict in Angola are substantively the same as the dissertation, citation references will be to the book. The book’s greater accessibility is accentuated by its internet availability as a PDF.<sup>55</sup> The extensive reference notes at the end of the book provide a detailed description of the sources used by George.<sup>56</sup> Together with South African sources, George uses interviews with Cuban soldiers and Cuban publications. Nevertheless, this dissertation differs from *The Cuban Intervention in Angola* in that it uses a variety and array of sources that were

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<sup>51</sup> E. George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965-1991: From Che Guevara to Cuito Cuanavale* (London, 2005), 277.

<sup>52</sup> J. Geldenhuys, *A General’s Story: From an Era of War and Peace* (Johannesburg, 1995)

<sup>53</sup> H. Adam and K. Moodley, *The Opening of the Apartheid Mind: Options for a New South Africa* (Berkeley, 1993), 46

<sup>54</sup> E. George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965-1991: From Che Guevara to Cuito Cuanavale: a detailed study of Cuban Internationalism & the Angolan war*. PhD, University of Bristol, United Kingdom, 2001

<sup>55</sup> <http://www.cabinda.net/The-Cuban-Intervention-in-Angola.pdf>

<sup>56</sup> George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, 304-344



not available to George, for example, minutes of meetings of the South African State Security Council and declassified U.S. government documents.

There are areas of substantial agreement between *The Cuban Intervention in Angola* and this dissertation. Both agree that South Africa repeatedly tried and failed to defeat the Cubans and Angolans at Cuito Cuanavale. However, where both fundamentally differ and diverge is on their assessment of the significance of Cuito Cuanavale. George stated that Havana inflated the “importance of the battle of Cuito Cuanavale,” arguing that “Cuba constructed the myth of Cuito Cuanavale,” an “ersatz military victory...conjured up” by Fidel Castro.<sup>57</sup> He described Cuito Cuanavale “as a costly stalemate...no more than a costly stand-off, its real significance lying in the impetus it gave to the American brokered peace process.”<sup>58</sup> In George’s view, it was Washington who seized on the “costly stand-off” as the opportunity to negotiate an agreement that would extricate Cuba and South Africa from a war both wanted to exit and, therefore, end the conflict. George described the resulting New York Accords as a “triumph of Crocker [the chief U.S. diplomat in Africa] and, therefore, of Washington.”<sup>59</sup>

However, this dissertation argues that real significance of Cuito Cuanavale lay not only in preventing the South African capture of the town, but its role in a strategic *coup de main* that encompassed a massive build-up of Cuban and Angolan forces to the west of Cuito Cuanavale and on the Angolan/Namibian border that decisively altered the military balance in favour Cuba and Angola and against South Africa. *With Pretoria focused on Cuito Cuanavale, the Cuban plan was to achieve a stalemate at Cuito*

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<sup>57</sup> *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, 234-235 & 277-278

<sup>58</sup> *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, 213 & 3

<sup>59</sup> *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, 248



*Cuanavale, while completing the deployment of its forces in an outflanking operation.* This outmanoeuvring of South Africa was to have profound consequences. This dissertation argues that it was this change in the military balance of power that was the principal driving force behind the negotiations, eventually having significant repercussion within apartheid South Africa. George only briefly discusses Havana's military deployment on the Namibian/Angolan border, mentioning that the number of Cuban troops had reached 65,000.<sup>60</sup> His failure to adequately address this phase of the conflict and its implications is - in this author's opinion - a serious gap. The areas of the 1987-88 conflict in Angola where *The Cuban Intervention in Angola* and this dissertation clearly diverge and substantially differ are highlighted and discussed at various places.

With the exception of *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, the historiography on Cuito Cuanavale is not in-depth, often based on secondary resources and testimony primarily from only one side of the conflict. Many of those who declared Cuito Cuanavale as a defeat for South Africa and, therefore, a victory for the anti-apartheid forces were active supporters and activists in the international anti-apartheid movement; some being actual participants in the southern African liberation struggles. As a result, their positions are seen by others as not objective or unbiased but as being ideologically driven, re-waging the 'old' battles on the terrain of scholarship. Of course, the same critique can be leveled at many of those who either dismiss Cuito Cuanavale or label it a SADF victory.

## **REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS & BLACK SOUTH AFRICANS, 1974-76**

The 1987-88 military confrontation in Angola was the most intense episode of a conflict that began in 1975 with the South African invasion of Angola, an action heralded by the collapse of Portuguese colonialism in southern Africa. The apartheid regime's

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<sup>60</sup> *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, 246 & 303



relationship with the rest of southern Africa was profoundly affected by the successful anti-colonial and independence struggles in Angola and Mozambique. As a consequence of these developments, Pretoria (particularly the Botha regime) viewed the arena outside the borders of South Africa as a critical locus of struggle.

The break-up of the cordon of white-ruled states surrounding South Africa in 1974-1975 resulted in Pretoria restructuring its relationship with the region. As anti-colonial struggles at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s intensified, engulfing the countries surrounding South Africa, Pretoria adopted an interventionist policy and undertook covert operations in Angola, Rhodesia and Mozambique. In Angola and Mozambique, the SADF cooperated closely with the Portuguese colonial authorities.<sup>61</sup> This covert involvement reflected the rethinking underway in Pretoria aimed at countering the liberation movements and protecting the apartheid regime, which conceptualized “the region, and particularly the minority-ruled and colonial territories of Southern Rhodesia, Angola, Mozambique and South West Africa, primarily as a military buffer zone.”<sup>62</sup>

In 1969, a report crafted by then-Minister of Defence P.W. Botha, stated that South Africa faced “ever increasing threats from outside.”<sup>63</sup> The 1973 *White Paper on*

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<sup>61</sup> N. Ashford, “Can the West Afford to lose out in the power struggle for Angola?”, *The Times*, 11 November 1975; Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 51; P. Gleijeses, Cuba and the Independence of Namibia, *Cold War History*, 7:2 (2007), 285-303; Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, 272; R. Hallett, The South African Intervention in Angola, *African Affairs*, 77: 308 (1978), 350; Interview with Major General Chris Thirion, Pretoria, 2 August 2006; *Repression and Resistance: truth and reconciliation commission of South Africa report II*, (1999), 13-16

<sup>62</sup> *Repression and Resistance*, 13

<sup>63</sup> *White Paper on Defence and Armament Production* (Pretoria, 1969), 2; See N. Crawford, *The Domestic Sources and Consequences of Aggressive Foreign Policies: The Folly of South Africa's 'Total Strategy.'* Working Paper 41 (Cape Town, 1995), 6



*Defence* – also shaped primarily by Botha – explicitly argued that South Africa was “a target for international communism and its cohorts - leftist activists, exaggerated humanism, permissiveness, materialism, and related ideologies.”<sup>64</sup> Moreover, as South Africa held “a position of strategic importance,”<sup>65</sup> it was being specifically “singled out as a special target for the by-product of their ideologies, such as black radicalism, exaggerated individual freedom, one-man-one-vote, and a host of other slogans employed against us based on double standards.”<sup>66</sup> An editorial in *The Star* reflected this growing concern over the “long-term pressures from within and without.”<sup>67</sup> It noted “the military situation had changed dramatically following the intensification of the black attack on the white-ruled buffer states which shelter South Africa.”<sup>68</sup> The SADF’s submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) underscored the growing apprehension, stating “for the first time, the potential threat of conventional war was on the northern borders of the sub-continent.”<sup>69</sup> In response Pretoria’s “strategy was to keep the ‘defence line’ as far as possible from South Africa itself.”<sup>70</sup> The buffer zone was of singular importance. A quasi-*cordon sanitaire*, it insulated South Africa from the

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<sup>64</sup> *White Paper on Defence and Armament Production* (Pretoria, 1973), 1. See Crawford, *The Domestic Sources*, 6

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 1

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 1

<sup>67</sup> “Big apartheid change on way”, *The Star*, 22 January 1974. See also J.Lelyveld, *Move Your Shadow: South Africa, Black and White* (London, 1985), 25; R.M. Price, *The Apartheid State in Crisis: Political Transformation in South Africa 1975-1990* (Oxford, 1991), 42

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Repression and Resistance*, 14

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 14



pressures of African nationalism. Maintaining it was considered an imperative.

The overthrow of the fascist regime in Portugal in 1974 caught Pretoria by surprise. Lisbon declared its intention to grant independence to Angola and Mozambique as quickly as was practicable. In response, Pretoria significantly reoriented South African regional policy.<sup>71</sup> These events transformed South Africa's "friends into foes."<sup>72</sup> The SADF submission to the TRC emphasized the sudden transformation: "The unexpected coup in Portugal on 25 April 1974 brought the RSA's defence line to its borders and this changed the government's perceptions of security in a very dramatic way."<sup>73</sup> Prominent white South African political leaders and commentators viewed with trepidation the impending end of Portuguese colonialism, casting the imminent independence of Angola and Mozambique as a serious threat to South Africa.<sup>74</sup> The cordon had been breached.

The 1975 *White Paper on Defence and Armament Production*, written under the direction of Defence Minister Botha, was the defining document that laid out Pretoria's interpretation of regional developments. It further elaborated on the positions outlined in the 1969 and 1973 *White Papers on Defence*. What stands out is the characterization of the threat from Angola and Mozambique as primarily political (as opposed to military). It stated that neither Angola nor Mozambique posed a credible military danger, noting

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<sup>71</sup> See A. Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa* (London, 1996), 210

<sup>72</sup> Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, 272

<sup>73</sup> *Repression and Resistance*, 20

<sup>74</sup> See *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa 1975* (Johannesburg, 1976), 302-7; *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa 1974* (Johannesburg, 1975), 98-117; C. Leguma, *Southern Africa: The Secret Diplomacy of Detente - South Africa at the Cross Roads* (New York, 1975), 18; "Give Vorster his six months, says Schwarz", *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 November 1974



that the military challenge found “its only actual physical expression in the existence of armed elements of banned political organization accommodated in neighbouring states.”<sup>75</sup> These “armed elements” were not considered militarily significant.

The 1975 *White Paper* framed the threat within the ideological strictures of the Cold War. Newly independent Angola and Mozambique fell “within the ambit of the communist international battle for world domination,”<sup>76</sup> reflecting “the increase and establishment of communist influence and presence in southern Africa.”<sup>77</sup> Pretoria conflated communism with the anti-apartheid struggle, equating “communism as resistance to apartheid.”<sup>78</sup> The direct substantive threat posed was the political and ideological influence these successful anti-colonial struggles would have on black South Africans. The 1975 *White Paper* argued that the emergence of newly independent southern African countries would have a direct political and ideological impact inside South Africa and, therefore, represented a concrete threat to the apartheid system. The most serious danger was that blacks would be encouraged and driven to “greater efforts”<sup>79</sup> to overthrow the apartheid system:

Undesirable influences and tendencies will undoubtedly encourage the radical elements in revolutionary organizations inside and outside

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<sup>75</sup> *White Paper on Defence and Armament Production* (Pretoria, 1975), 7. See Crawford, *The Domestic Sources*, 7-8; Price, *The Apartheid State*, 85

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>78</sup> E. Gilbert and J.T. Reynolds, *Africa In World History: From Prehistory to the Present* (Upper Saddle River, 2004), 334

<sup>79</sup> *White Paper on Defence 1975*, 6- 7. See Crawford, *The Domestic Sources*, 7; P. Hopkins and H. Granger, *The Rocky Rioter Year Show: The Inside Story of the 1976 Soweto Uprising* (Cape Town, 2001), 26; Price, *The Apartheid State*, 85



and incite them to greater efforts. They regard Angola and Mozambique as new allies and potential new operational bases.<sup>80</sup>

This would prove to be a well-founded conclusion. The impact of the national liberation movements on South Africa was not a Pretoria created phantasm. The developments in Mozambique and Angola from 1974 to 1976 did have a considerable influence among black South Africans, inspiring the internal anti-apartheid forces. It was a significant factor in their increased radicalization and militancy. The greatest influence appears to have been on black youth. This was most clearly reflected in the response of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM).

Primarily based in urban areas, the BCM “had created a heightened political awareness amongst certain strata in the urban population.”<sup>81</sup> The two main organizational expressions, the South African Students’ Organization (SASO), founded in 1968, and the Black Peoples’ Convention (BPC), founded in 1972, planned activities and published pamphlets in support of the *Frente de Libertação de Moçambique* (Liberation Front of Mozambique - FRELIMO) and also in celebration of Mozambique’s liberation from Portugal. Allieson Lazarus, a secondary school student at the time, remembered being influenced by the BCM’s Mozambique activities, emphasizing their role in shaping the worldview of youth: “FRELIMO events were organized by the BCM. They were a defining moment for a particular group of young people.”<sup>82</sup> The success of

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<sup>80</sup> *White Paper on Defence 1975*, 6-7. See Crawford, *The Domestic Sources*, 7-8; Price, *The Apartheid State*, 85

<sup>81</sup> P. Frankel, N. Pines and M. Swilling, *State, Resistance and Change in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1988), 94

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Allieson Lazarus, London, 12 June 2006



FRELIMO had “contributed to a growing sense that minority domination was not unassailable.”<sup>83</sup>

Amongst black students the greeting “Viva!” became a popular cry.<sup>84</sup> When Mozambique’s independence was formally achieved, SASO and BPC called for major celebrations on 25 September. The Minister of Justice responded by banning, under the Riotous Assemblies Act, any gatherings or meetings by SASO or the BPC from 24 September to 20 October 1974. As a result, several members were arrested and detained. Nine SASO and BPC members were charged with involvement in a “conspiracy to bring about revolutionary change in South Africa by violent means or the threat of such means,” and “with organizing rallies in support of Frelimo in September 1974.”<sup>85</sup>

Despite the prohibition and the arrests, pro-FRELIMO rallies were held in Durban and the University of the North at Turfloop in northern Transvaal on 25 September 1974.<sup>86</sup> More than 1,000 students attended the Turfloop rally.<sup>87</sup> Police attempts to shut down the rally resulted in fighting between the authorities and the

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<sup>83</sup> Frankel, Pines and Swilling, *State, Resistance and Change*, 94

<sup>84</sup> Dubow, *The African National Congress*, 81

<sup>85</sup> D. Niddie, “Now the nine SASO accused await judgment”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 11 November 1975; See also the following series of articles from the black South African newspaper: *The World*, “White’s will eventually give in: SASO”, 6 February, 1976; “SASO faces action by government”, 10 February 1976; “SASO Inciting Armed Revolt”, 10 February 1976; “SASO’s fate hangs in the balance”, 11 February 1976; “SASO Leader Hits back at Govt Report”, 11 February 1976; “SASO Accused of stirring race hatred”, 13 February 1976; “Turfloop to decide on SASO”, 25 February 1976

<sup>86</sup> Rebusoajoang, Education and Social Control in South Africa, *African Affairs*, 78: 311 (1979), 228-239; A *Survey of Race Relations 1975*, 23; J.G.E. Wolfson, *Turfloop: A Summary of the Reports of the Snyman and Jackson Commissions of Inquiry Into The University of the North* (Pretoria, 1976); Baruch Hirson, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash: The Soweto Revolt: Roots of A Revolution?* (London, 1979), 89

<sup>87</sup> Hirson, *Year of Fire*, 90



students. Several students were arrested and the campus was closed for two-days. This was followed by another week of student protests. Before the Turfloop rally, students covered the campus buildings with posters and painted slogans expressing their sentiments on Mozambique and apartheid. They saw in Mozambican independence “the affirmation, in political terms, of Black Consciousness and the confirmation of black identity in the continent of their birth.”<sup>88</sup> These slogans illustrated the connection in the students’ consciousness between the successful Mozambican struggle and the anti-apartheid movement inside South Africa:

Frelimo fought and regained our soil, our dignity. It is a story. Change the name and the story applies to YOU.  
Viva Frelimo. Azania is bored and from this boredom a Revolution shall erupt.  
Down with Vorster and his dogs (Boers)! Power!!! We shall overcome.  
Revolution!! Machel will help! Away with Vorster Ban! We are for Afro Black Power!!!  
We shall drive them to the sea! Long live Azania!  
Samora Machel is now coming and Vorster must GO!!  
The dignity of the Black Man has been restored in Mozambique and so shall it be here.  
Black must rule.<sup>89</sup>

The pro-FRELIMO rallies were a direct challenge to the status quo. Oliver Tambo stated that to that point they “represented the sharpest confrontation we had had with the apartheid regime in the struggle for the support of our region and of Africa as a whole.”<sup>90</sup> J. H. Synman, a justice of South Africa’s Supreme Court, led a commission of inquiry into the events of September 25. The commission attributed the protests and the riot “to a

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<sup>88</sup> G. M. Nkondo (ed.), *Turfloop Testimony: The dilemma of a black university in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1976), 7

<sup>89</sup> Wolfson, *Turmoil at Turfloop*, 28

<sup>90</sup> O. Tambo, Black Consciousness and the Soweto Uprising, in Adelaide Tambo (ed.), *Preparing for Power: Oliver Tambo Speaks* (London, 1987), 121



situation outside the university,” namely “the success of Frelimo in Mozambique.”<sup>91</sup> It singled out the new militancy that was now dominant among the students, warning that the events of 25 September demonstrated that Black Consciousness had “introduced a new factor into the situation: an aggressive claim that the Black man is the White man’s equal. The only sphere where he feels capable of a trial of strength with the White man is the political one.”<sup>92</sup>

Tom Lodge argued that the increased assertiveness of the black working class, reflected in the upsurge of strikes from 1972-1976, could, in part, be attributed to the influence of regional events.<sup>93</sup> The number of strikes by black South Africans soared from an annual average of 72 during 1970-1972 involving 5,329 workers to 318 involving 49,144 workers, in 1973-1976.<sup>94</sup> The challenge posed to the apartheid system was captured by a 22 January 1974 article in *The Star* with the headline “Builders Warn on African Unions,” arguing for the necessity to maintain political and ideological control in the face of growing African working class militancy.<sup>95</sup>

The 1975 South African invasion of and subsequent withdrawal in 1976 from Angola were also to have a significant effect on black South Africans. At the December 1975 annual conference of the BPC, delegates passed a resolution recognizing the *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (People's Movement for the Liberation of

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<sup>91</sup> Wolfson, *Turmoil at Turfloop*, 3

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 11

<sup>93</sup> T. Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (New York, 1983), 331-332

<sup>94</sup> K.A. Manzo, *Domination and Social Change in South Africa: The Local Effects of Global Power* (London, 1992), 214; Adrian Guelke, *Rethinking the Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (London, 2005), 123.

<sup>95</sup> “Builders Warn on African Unions”, *The Star*, 22 January 1974



Angola – MPLA) as “the legitimate government of Angola.”<sup>96</sup> The impact of the events in Angola among blacks as a whole is probably best reflected in the coverage by *The World*, the major black daily newspaper, one of the most influential black publications. At the time, it was South Africa’s second largest newspaper. It had an estimated circulation of 160,000, with a weekend circulation of 200,000.<sup>97</sup> *The World* had a broader reach into the black communities than the literature or activities of SASO or the BPC, which were predominantly targeted at the student movement.

In 1976, *The World* provided extensive coverage of the conflict in Angola. From 19 January to 19 March 1976, 66 articles were published; a ratio of slightly more than one article per day. Several articles appeared on the front-page. Various editorials focused on the conflict and its broader implications. That *The World* would devote so much time and space to Angola is indicative not only of the editorial staff’s interests and concerns but of what was deemed to be the interests and concerns of Black South Africans. The editorial shift from suspicion to support for the MPLA and the Cuban presence may also be indicative of not only a change in attitude of the editorial staff but of blacks as a whole.

Initially *The World* presented various articles on the progress of the conflict and refrained from expressing any editorial position; however, in January 1976, it published a series of articles with contradictory positions on who was actually winning the conflict. If anything, the initial tilt was toward UNITA as interviews were published with UNITA spokespersons;<sup>98</sup> but then, on 26 January 1976, a front-page article described the South

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<sup>96</sup> *A Survey of Race Relations 1975*, 23

<sup>97</sup> G.T. Kurian, *World Press Encyclopaedia*, II, (London, 1982), 796

<sup>98</sup> E.g. “Decisive battle of Angola Shaping Up”, *The World*, 19 January 1976, “MPLA forces sweep through Angola”, *The World*, 19 January 1976; “Unita Beats Back



African military setback as a “crisis for Pretoria.”<sup>99</sup> Subsequent editorials and articles argued for respect for Angolan sovereignty and independence, stating that South Africa should not be involved in Angola.<sup>100</sup>

A series of articles focused on the deteriorating South African military situation, highlighting the possibility of a major clash in Namibia.<sup>101</sup> On the 13 February, a front-page article declared that Cuban troops “have swept down to only 200 km from the South West African border...”<sup>102</sup> Another front-page with a big banner headline reported Pretoria’s warning that the SADF would retaliate if Namibia was threatened and the border crossed.<sup>103</sup>

*The World* did not confine itself to only reporting on the unfolding military situation. It also explored black South African attitudes: an exploration that provided insights into how blacks viewed regional developments. A 19 February editorial posed a provocative question seeking to measure Black support for Pretoria’s actions in Angola: “Can White South Africans count on the support of their Black countrymen in the event

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Cubans”, *The World*, 20 January 1976; “Cuban offensive repulsed”, 30 January 1976; “Featured fighter is the people’s idol”, *The World*, 22 January 1976; “OAU Support For MPLA”, *The World* 12 February 1976

<sup>99</sup> “Big Row Brews Over Angola: SA Parliament meets on crucial issue”, *The World*, 26 January 1976

<sup>100</sup> “Angola – What is going on?”, *The World*, 28 January 1976; “Moment of truth for Angola”, *The World*, 16 February 1976; “SA must recognize the MPLA”, *The World*, 18 February 1976

<sup>101</sup> “MPLA Continue to Rout FNLA, *The World*, 9 February 1976; Black Soldiers train to defeat Ovambo”, *The World*, 10 February 1976

<sup>102</sup> “Cubans nearing SWA border”, *The World*, 13 February 1976; “Bloodbath Fears Grow”, *The World*, 17 February 1976

<sup>103</sup> “MPLA Warned To Keep Out”, *The World*, 18 February 1976; See also; “South Africa must stand firm”, *The World*, 18 February 1976; “South Africa peace contact by MPLA”, *The World*, 18 February 1976



of a Russian threat to this country from Angola.”<sup>104</sup> *The World* requested that readers write in and express their positions. The results were published on the 11 March front-page: “Blacks Speak Out On War Issue: Many against fighting ‘White man’s battle.’” From 19 February to 11 March, *The World* received an average of more than 12 letters per day on the Angolan conflict, with more than 10 of them rejecting the apartheid regime’s position.

According to the tally, 203 out of 244 respondents (83.2 per cent) disavowed Pretoria’s policy, stating they would not defend South Africa.<sup>105</sup> The 27 February edition also carried a short ‘man on the street’ interview. When asked to comment on the situation in Angola and the MPLA victory, and to say whether he was “pleased” or not by the outcome, he responded with an unambiguous statement of support: “Pleased? I am delighted...look the [South African] government is against them so there must be some good in the MPLA.”<sup>106</sup>

Several articles focused on the threat that Cuban/Angolan forces posed to Pretoria’s interests.<sup>107</sup> Angolan President Neto was quoted, declaring that the MPLA was now in a position “to contribute to the independence of other peoples.”<sup>108</sup> Perhaps the most striking commentary was the editorial of 24 February, which unequivocally

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<sup>104</sup> “Asking a pertinent question”, *The World*, 19 February 1976

<sup>105</sup> “Blacks Speak Out On War Issue: Many against fighting ‘White man’s battle’”, *The World*, 11 March 1976

<sup>106</sup> “I’ll ignore the war and perhaps it will vanish”, *The World*, 24 February 1976

<sup>107</sup> “SA soldiers on standby in border operational zone”, *The World*, 20 February 1976; “Cuba will support Namibians”, *The World*, 25 February 1976; “Cuba in Africa to stay”, *The World*, 26 February 1976

<sup>108</sup> “Cunene ‘scheme’ the SADF’s”, *The World*, 2 March 1976



expressed support for the Cuban intervention in Angola and explicitly linked the defeat of South African forces to black liberation:

Black Africa is riding the crest of a wave generated by the Cuban success in Angola. South Africa backed off, the West did not come in at all, and from the peak of this surge of dominance over the whole White South, Black Africa is tasting the heady wine of the possibility of realizing the dream of 'total liberation.'<sup>109</sup>

*The World* was not the only paper interested in the positive response of Black South Africans to Angolan developments. Another major South African daily newspaper, the *Rand Daily Mail*, read widely by whites, noted "[t]he boost to African nationalism which has seen South Africa forced to retreat."<sup>110</sup> A *Rand Daily Mail* editorial commented on the psychological dimension:

In Angola Black troops – Cuban and Angolans – have defeated White troops in military exchanges. Whether the bulk of the offensive was by Cubans or Angolans is immaterial in the colour-conscious context of the war's battlefield, for the reality is that they have won, are winning and are not white and that psychological edge, that advantage the White man has enjoyed and exploited over 300 years of colonialism and empire, is slipping away.<sup>111</sup>

A *New York Times* op-ed echoed this sentiment describing, "the drive for black freedom spearheaded by Cuban troops."<sup>112</sup> In the same issue, a black worker declared: "It makes us all think. In Rhodesia they are talking and after 10 years they have nothing. In Angola and Mozambique they fought and they have won."<sup>113</sup> Nicholas Ashford, *The Times*

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<sup>109</sup> "Kaunda's hardening line on Rhodesia issue", *The World*, 24 February 1976

<sup>110</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 17 February 1976 (Untitled article)

<sup>111</sup> R. Sargent, "The mercenary legend slips away in Angola", *Rand Daily Mail*, 13 February 1976

<sup>112</sup> C.L. Sulzberger, "U.S. Indecision in the World", *New York Times*, 21 February 1976

<sup>113</sup> M.T. Kaufman, "White Officials of South Africa Debate Black Loyalty in a War", *New York Times*, 21 February 1976



(London) South Africa correspondent, wrote that based on his discussions it was clear that Black South Africans saw the war in Angola “as part of the general liberation struggle.”<sup>114</sup> One commented: “Two years ago we could never have dreamed that the Portuguese would have left and there would be black governments in these two countries. It has completely altered our own outlook.”<sup>115</sup> White South African politicians took note of growing black valorization. Colin Eglin, a leader of the Progressive Reform Party, told the South African parliament:

Far too many black people see what is happening in the North and in Angola as part of the process of liberation from discrimination within in South Africa. I believe that many of the black people of South Africa are getting silent satisfaction out of the successes of the M.P.L.A.<sup>116</sup>

In some cases the satisfaction was not silent, as illustrated in Cape Town where “huge black audiences would watch the television news in coloured hotels and cheer every report of South African casualties in the ‘operational zone.’”<sup>117</sup> The South African *Sunday Times* noted, “coloureds’ would jeer “when South Africans appear on the screen” but “when scenes are shown of MPLA or Cubans soldiers there are shouts of exultation.”<sup>118</sup>

The impact of South Africa’s defeat extended to the Soweto Uprising that began on 16 June 1976. While the immediate impetus for the uprising was the imposition of Afrikaans as a means of school instruction and the underlying cause the pent-up

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<sup>114</sup> N. Ashford, “Black S Africa newspaper asks its readers if they would fight”, *The Times* 23 February 1976

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> Kaufman, *New York Times* 21 February 1976 [untitled]

<sup>117</sup> A. Callincos and J. Rogers, *Southern Africa after Soweto* (London, 1977), 157

<sup>118</sup> Quoted in R. Hallett, *The South African Intervention in Angola, African Affairs*, 77:308 (1978), 385



frustration against apartheid, Mozambican independence and the SADF defeat in Angola had an important role in amplifying militancy among Black youth. Allister Sparks, a reporter and editor of the *Rand Daily Mail* from 1977 to 1981, observed: “The slogans and rhetoric of the Portuguese colonial revolution swept the South African townships and stimulated a nascent rise in revolutionary consciousness.”<sup>119</sup> Kane-Berman noted: “to the extent that black South Africans saw the withdrawal of South African military forces from Angola as a sign that white power was not invincible, this would have had an important psychological impact.”<sup>120</sup> A principal of a Soweto high school provided compelling testimony, stating that the situation in Angola “was very much on the minds of his 700 students...They discuss it all the time and they are pleased by the developments there – it gives them hope.”<sup>121</sup> The *Sunday Times* observed that Cape Town’s ‘coloured’ townships gangs were adopting new names such as “Cuban Kids” and “MPLA Terrors.”<sup>122</sup> An editorial in *The Times* explicitly linked regional developments to the uprising:

Afrikaans was only the detonator...Now that there is a free state on one of the Republics borders, and now that Africans are fighting it out with white troops in Rhodesia... The young are roused, poised, awaiting their moment in South Africa.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Sparks and Green, *Namibia: The Nation after Independence*, 302

<sup>120</sup> J. Kane-Berman, *South Africa: The Method in the Madness* (London, 1979), 106. See also D. Chanaiwa, Southern Africa Since 1935, in *Africa Since 1935: General History of Africa*, ‘III’ (Oxford, 1999), 273; E. Molobi, ‘From Bantu Education to People’s Education’, in R. Cohen and W. Corbett (eds.), *Popular Struggles in South Africa* (London, 1988), 155 & 185

<sup>121</sup> Kaufman, *New York Times*, 21 February 1976 [untitled]

<sup>122</sup> Quoted in Hallett, *The South African Intervention*, 385

<sup>123</sup> “From Sharpeville to Soweto”, *The Times*, 17 June 1976



White South African politicians were cognizant of the link. Helen Suzman, a prominent member of the opposition Progressive Party, highlighted the role of regional developments: “The days of patient submission are over for them [Black youth]...The occurrences beyond our borders in Mozambique and Angola and Rhodesia have not escaped their notice.”<sup>124</sup> The Synman Commission’s report directly tied the rising tide of resistance to regional events: “The political and military events in southern Africa... helped to create the state of mind in which rebelliousness could be stirred up.”<sup>125</sup> Perhaps, the most poignant illustration of this influence was a placard used during the Soweto march. It simply stated: “It happened in Angola. Why not here??”<sup>126</sup>

The ANC and the SACP depicted regional developments as crucial to the struggle within South Africa. Mandela, in a message smuggled out of Robben Island, stated, “the frontiers of white supremacy are shrinking. Mozambique and Angola are free and the war of liberation gathers force in Namibia and Zimbabwe”<sup>127</sup> This same satisfaction was expressed in a SACP statement, which noted that “[w]hilst Angola destroyed the myth of the South African military invincibility, Soweto demolished the myth that the government’s security forces are able to destroy the people’s revolutionary spirit.”<sup>128</sup> Oliver Tambo unequivocally linked Angola and the Soweto Uprising:

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<sup>124</sup> *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Riots at Soweto and Elsewhere from 16<sup>th</sup> of June to the 28<sup>th</sup> of February 1977*, ‘I’ (Pretoria, 1980), 580

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 580

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 580

<sup>127</sup> K. Asmal, D. Chidester and W. James (eds.), *Nelson Mandela: In His Own Words* (New York, 2003), 44-5

<sup>128</sup> Document 132: The Way Forward from Soweto — Extract from political report adopted by the Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the South African Communist Party, April 1977, in *South African Communists Speak: Documents from the History of the South African Communist Party, 1915 – 1980* (London, 1981), 420. See



Terrified at the prospect of the victory of the forces of progress within the country in the aftermath and as a direct continuation of the popular victory in Angola, the Vorster regime, unleashed the bloody terror that is today symbolized by Soweto.<sup>129</sup>

This position was not just reflective of official pronouncements of the leadership the anti-apartheid movement, who might be accused of hyperbole or embellishment, especially in order to maintain good relations with allies such as the MPLA and Cuba. It was also the position of rank and file activists. The significance of the South African defeat for the struggle inside the country was underscored by Neil MacDonald, an anti-apartheid activist who was incarcerated after being caught journeying to Angola to join the ANC's armed wing. He said: "The SADF defeat in 1976 played a major role in raising our consciousness."<sup>130</sup> Another activist, "Jacob," was more expansive, describing the impact as:

Enormous! Militants who had been subdued because of the tremendous repression started to surface again. Workers and students held lighting mass rallies in support of the Angolans and Mozambicans although these are banned...It is no secret that since it became clear that the Portuguese were going to have to get out of Angola and Mozambique, there has been a great upsurge of militancy in South Africa. From 1974 onward there have been repeated strikes in many industries. For a country where trade unions and strikes are illegal, this is very significant and testifies to the growing militancy of workers. ***But it was the defeat of Vorster's troops in Angola which completely transformed people's thinking, especially the young people...***<sup>131</sup> [Emphasis added].

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also S. Ellis and T. Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid: The ANC & the South African Communist Party in Exile* (London, 1992), 77; R.W. Johnson, *South Africa: The First Man, The Last Nation* (London, 2004), 165; J. Slovo, Perspectives of Armed Struggle in South Africa, in D.L. Cohen and J. Daniel (eds.), *Political Economy of Africa: Selected Readings* (Essex, 1982), 261; Tambo, *Preparing for Power*, 102 & 125

<sup>129</sup> Tambo, *Preparing for Power*, 140. See also W. Burchett, *Southern Africa Stands Up: The Revolutions in Angola, Mozambique, Rhodesia, Namibia and South Africa* (New York, 1978), 246

<sup>130</sup> Interview with Neil MacDonald, Cape Town, 7 August 2006

<sup>131</sup> Burchett, *Southern Africa Stands Up*, 246



Having had a radicalizing effect on black youth, regional developments had played a significant role in re-igniting the anti-apartheid struggle within South Africa. The Soweto Uprising and other black rebellions that followed in Soweto's wake created an unprecedented crisis for the regime, signaling the collapse of Pretoria's ability to confine black politics within the limits defined and permitted by apartheid. The uprising was a watershed in the history of apartheid, heralding "the demise of white supremacy and made real the possibility of liberation, perhaps for the first time...An unquenchable spirit of rebellion was becoming manifest..."<sup>132</sup>

The events of 1974-1976 demonstrated the interconnectedness of the struggles outside and inside South Africa. Both the apartheid state and the anti-apartheid forces recognized this link. The demise of Portuguese colonial rule led "many in Africa to conclude that the struggle against white rule and oppression in southern Africa will become much easier."<sup>133</sup> Anti-apartheid forces outside of Africa also shared this view. For example, the British Anti-Apartheid Movement argued for the interconnected nature of the liberation struggles in southern Africa. Its 1972-73 annual report argued that in southern Africa "the economic, political and military problems of all the territories...are directly linked to each other."<sup>134</sup> It further declared "battles fought in any one of the southern African territories will be battles for the future of the whole region."<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Dubow, *The African National Congress*, 82

<sup>133</sup> S. Mhlongo, 'An Analysis of the Classes in South Africa' in Cohen and Daniel (eds.), *Political Economy of Africa*, 151

<sup>134</sup> R. Fieldhouse, *Anti-Apartheid: A history of the movement in Britain: A study in pressure group politics* (London, 2005), 128

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 128



These statements could be dismissed as politically motivated pronouncements by parties, which had vested interests in how the events in Mozambique and Angola were portrayed. As opponents of Pretoria engaged in an effort to internationally isolate the apartheid state and increase their own support, it was to their advantage to present these events as setbacks for apartheid and victories for the liberation movement. However, the events inside South Africa in 1974-76, and Pretoria's internal and external responses, gave credence to the analysis that regional events were redounding inside South Africa to the benefit of the anti-apartheid struggle. This was the prelude to the transformation of southern Africa into an immense battlefield.

#### **TOTAL STRATEGY & THE MILITARIZATION OF THE APARTHEID STATE**

The Soweto Uprising and regional developments represented the most serious challenges yet faced by the apartheid regime. The failure of the SADF's 1975 invasion to thwart the consolidation of a MPLA government in Angola had significant repercussions on the nature of South African governance. Events (internal and external) of 1974-76 a *Rand Daily Mail* editorial predicted would strengthen the position of the hardliners in Pretoria, who would now "demand an entrenchment of white power."<sup>136</sup> South African ruling circles viewed the apartheid regime as under a growing multi-pronged attack. In response, Pretoria adopted a strategy that would have profound consequences for the nature of the apartheid state and the subsequent course of the struggle for and against apartheid: intensified repression inside South Africa and war waged outside it.

The 1977 *White Paper on Defence*, written under the direction of Botha, concluded that regional changes had resulted in "an increase in the tempo of

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<sup>136</sup> "The laager danger", *Rand Daily Mail*, 22 December 1976



developments and this has brought the threats nearer in time.”<sup>137</sup> What was at stake was “the right of self-determination of the white nation.”<sup>138</sup> This view was elaborated and encapsulated in the concept of a ‘total onslaught’ on South Africa. Magnus Malan, then SADF Chief of Staff, declared that “total onslaught” was driven by the objective of “the implacable and unconditional imposition of the aggressors’ will on the target state.”<sup>139</sup> This required a response encompassing all spheres, a “total strategy” that would contest all arenas of social and political life. The 1977 *White Paper* defined “total strategy” as the “interdependent and coordinated action in all fields—military, psychological, economic, political, sociological, technological, diplomatic, ideological, cultural etc.”<sup>140</sup>

The central idea guiding total strategy was the proposition that the main threat to South Africa originated outside the country. The external arena now assumed heightened strategic significance. The emergence of black-led states on the borders was considered a primary component of the “total onslaught” on South Africa. General Malan declared that South Africa was “involved in a total war.”<sup>141</sup> While Pretoria sought to use the economic dependence of the surrounding countries on South Africa as a lever to force them to come to an accommodation with the apartheid regime and accept its regional domination, it also increasingly relied on a program of destabilization of what became known as the Frontline States. The initial aim was the imposition of pliable and client

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<sup>137</sup> *White Paper on Defence and Armament Production* (Pretoria, 1977), 7; Price, *The Apartheid State*, 45

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

<sup>139</sup> D. Geldenhuys and H. Kotze, Aspects of Political Decision Making in South Africa, *Politikon: The South African Journal of Political Science*, 12:1, (1983), 35

<sup>140</sup> *White Paper 1977*, 4-5; Price, *The Apartheid State*, 45

<sup>141</sup> *The Star*, 10 September 1977 (Untitled article)



regimes. If Pretoria could not install client regimes, then it would undermine the political and economic stability of its neighbours. This task could only be accomplished by military means. The projection of armed might was seen as indispensable to the preservation of the apartheid regime, which required the reassertion its regional hegemony.<sup>142</sup> While it could not restore colonial rule it “could dominate its region with overwhelming military and economic superiority, then it could call all the shots in the area and there would be little anyone else could do. The loss of the buffer would cease to matter.”<sup>143</sup> This approach was reaffirmed in subsequent white papers on defence, which evaluated and re-affirmed the implementation of “total strategy” and the project of destabilizing the surrounding countries.<sup>144</sup>

The war of destabilization reflected Pretoria’s determination to attack its designated enemies anywhere and everywhere. On 6 February 1986, Magnus Malan publicly affirmed this position, telling the South African parliament that South Africa forces would hammer apartheid adversaries “wherever they find them. What I am saying

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<sup>142</sup> C. Alden, *Apartheid’s Last Stand: The Rise and Fall of the South African Security State* (London, 1996.), 272-273; S. Chan, *Exporting Apartheid: Foreign Policies in Southern Africa, 1978-1988* (New York, 1990), 13-28 & 145-217; G. Evans, South Africa in Remission: The Foreign Policy of an Altered State, *Journal of African Studies*, 34:2 (1996) 251; W. Gutteridge, South Africa: Strategy for Survival?, in W. Gutteridge (ed.), *South Africa: From Apartheid to National Unity, 1981-1994* (Aldershot, 1995), 6-21; R.S. Jaster, *The Defence of White Power: South African Foreign Policy Under Pressure* (London, 1988.), 68-158; M.E. Lee, Southern Africa, in M.E. Crahan *et al.* (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World* (New York, 2001), 786-787; J. Seiler, ‘South Africa’s Regional Role’, in John Seiler (ed.), *Southern Africa Since the Portuguese Coup* (Boulder, 1980), 99-113

<sup>143</sup> Sparks and Green, *Namibia: The Nation after Independence*, 307

<sup>144</sup> *White Paper on Defence and Armament Production* (Pretoria, 1981); *White Paper on Defence and Armament Production* (Pretoria, 1984); Interview with Nial Barnard, Johannesburg, 20 August 2006



is the policy of the government.”<sup>145</sup> On 18 May 1988, he explicitly tied the regime’s survival to regional intervention: “To a large extent the solution lies in proceeding with cross-border operations so that the internal political problem can ultimately be solved.”<sup>146</sup> The SADF submission to the TRC confirmed that Pretoria’s “national security policy made explicit provision for pro-active actions beyond the borders of the RSA [Republic of South Africa].”<sup>147</sup> The TRC noted that the testimony of the SADF “was consistent with a view frequently expressed at State Security Council (SSC) meetings that the defence of South Africa should take place outside its border.”<sup>148</sup>

The overriding importance accorded to armed intervention throughout southern African put the military at the forefront of the implementation of “total strategy.” Consequently, considerable state power and prestige were marshalled behind the military. This had significant consequences not only on the policy front but also on the structure of the apartheid state, with direct and profound impact on the nature of governance in apartheid South Africa. New structures were created, leading to the hyper-centralization of decision-making.

In 1979 Botha (now Prime Minister) established the National Security Management System (NSMS). Its mandate was to prevent “a revolutionary climate.”<sup>149</sup> This was the crystallization of the 1977 *White Paper on Defence*’s call for a

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<sup>145</sup> Quoted in *Repression and Resistance*, 42

<sup>146</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, 18 May 1988, 10111. Deputy Minister of Defence W. N. Breytenbach made similar comments. See *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, 16 May 1988, 9914

<sup>147</sup> Quoted in *Repression and Resistance*, 4

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

<sup>149</sup> Seegers, *The Military in the Making*, 166



comprehensive restructuring of the decision-making and implementation process for “total strategy.” Restructuring was apocalyptically justified as “required for the continued survival of the RSA and its people.”<sup>150</sup> The *White Paper* called for the “coordinated action between all government departments, government institutions and other authorities to counter the multidimensional onslaught against the RSA...”<sup>151</sup> The core of the NSMS was the State Security Council. In 1972 during Vorster’s premiership, under the Security, Intelligence and State Security Act, the SSC had been established as an advisory body to the government that only met intermittently. Botha elevated the SSC from its advisory role to that of the central – and in many cases – the only decision-making body. It became the de facto government.

The SSC stood at the apex of the NSMS system that dominated the state.<sup>152</sup> Every government department was required to participate in the NSMS at all its levels. In practice, it meant that the existing government structure had to integrate into the NSMS. Ultimately every government sector was subordinate to the SSC.<sup>153</sup> The 1979 *White Paper on Defence* codified the SSC’s new status; it was through the SSC that national policy and planning were to be conducted and coordinated. The 1979 *White Paper* was quite unambiguous:

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<sup>150</sup> *White Paper on Defence 1977*, 8. See Price, *The Apartheid State*, 44

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 8

<sup>152</sup> Seegers, *The Military in the Making*, 166-168; Price, *The Apartheid State*, 87; *Repression and Resistance*, 29

<sup>153</sup> F.W. De Klerk, *The Last Trek: A New Beginning* (London, 1998), 115; Interview with Major-General Chris Thirion, Pretoria; Price, *The Apartheid State*, 87; Seegers, *The Military in the Making*, 166-168; *Repression and Resistance*, 29



Preparation for modern warfare, whether conventional or unconventional, necessitates highly coordinated action...co-ordinated at the level of the Work Committee and approved by the SSC.<sup>154</sup>

The SADF played a central role in transforming the SSC into the centre of concentrated power.<sup>155</sup> Malan, then Chief of the SADF, stated that the necessity for the elevation of the SSC was demonstrated by the war in Angola. According to Malan, Angola had “focused attention on the urgent necessity for the State Security Council to play a much fuller role in the national security of the republic than hitherto.”<sup>156</sup> In March 1977, he explicitly argued that in certain aspects “the democratic system of government” was incompatible with the “total strategy.”<sup>157</sup> Lieutenant General J. R. Dutton, then SADF Operational Chief of Staff, concurred: “Conventional organizations in democratic systems do not as a rule lend themselves to these procedures. Therefore organizational changes or adaptations would appear to be imperative.”<sup>158</sup>

If the SADF was the central institution in elevating and then consolidating the SSC as the decisive body in the reconfigured system of governance, Botha was the central figure. While, the policy of overt military regional intervention had begun under Vorster (particularly, the invasion of Angola in 1975), it was the accession of Botha to

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<sup>154</sup> *White Paper on Defence and Armament Production* (Pretoria, 1979), 2-3

<sup>155</sup> P. H. Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians: Civil-Military Relations in South Africa* (New York, 1985), 105

<sup>156</sup> R. Davies and D. O'Meara, Total Strategy in Southern Africa: An Analysis of South African Regional Policy since 1978, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 11: 2 (1985), 192

<sup>157</sup> International Defence & Aid Fund, *The Apartheid War Machine: The Strength and Deployment of the South African Armed Forces* (London, 1980), 7

<sup>158</sup> Lieutenant General J. R. Dutton, The Military Aspects of National Security, in M. H.H. Louw (ed.), *National Security: A Modern Approach* (Pretoria, 1977), 133



the office of Prime Minister that heralded the paramountcy of the military. The SADF at its highest levels considered Botha “one of them,” someone who was firmly rooted in their milieu. Riaan Labuschagne, who worked in the headquarters of the National Intelligence Service (an organization represented on the SSC), stated that Botha “preferred a cabal or inner circle of ministers advised by the security services through the organs of the State Security Council and the security management system.”<sup>159</sup> Botha had very close ties to the military and had been Minister of Defence from 1966 -1978. Thus, there was a fundamental coincidence of worldviews between him and the military leadership. The *White Papers on Defence* were written under Botha’s direction and supervision. F. W. De Klerk, who as a cabinet member from 1978 had observed Botha at close quarters, described him as “a hawk.”<sup>160</sup>

The military dominated the SSC. Among the permanent members were: the Prime Minister and later the President (Botha), Minister of Defence (General Magnus Malan), the Chief of the SADF and the heads of SADF Intelligence, the South Africa Army, Air Force and Navy. Joining them were the Foreign Minister (Roelof “Pik” Botha), the chief of the South Africa Police and the head of the (civilian) National Intelligence Service. Only members and invitees could participate in the SSC meetings and often the invitees would be other members of the military. For example, General Chris Thirion, deputy head of SADF Intelligence would participate.

All military or security operations inside and outside South Africa, overt and

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<sup>159</sup> R. Labuschagne, *In South Africa’s Secret Service: An Undercover Agent’s Story* (Alberton, South Africa, 2002), 23

<sup>160</sup> De Klerk, *The Last Trek*, 58



covert, were authorized by the SSC.<sup>161</sup> The reach of the military also extended into all areas of government. The military, thus, became “an active participant in policymaking. Not merely in military matters, but in wider security issues, both domestic and external, and even in matters concerning...economic and foreign policy.”<sup>162</sup> In effect, foreign, defence and internal security policy was kept out of the hands of civilians.<sup>163</sup> Retired General Chris Thirion stated, “the military wanted to take over everything.”<sup>164</sup>

The generals viewed the SADF as the vanguard, because in their view only the military understood the extent of the danger facing South Africa. General Constand Viljoen, SADF Chief of Staff from 1980-85, was very clear on this point: “From the military point of view, we realized the seriousness of the situation.”<sup>165</sup> This militarized approach to apartheid’s survival had necessitated a militarized governing apparatus. This was unequivocally demonstrated by the overweening power and composition of the SSC. Through the SSC, Botha in concert with the SADF general staff ruled South Africa. The

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<sup>161</sup> Interview with Colonel Eugene de Kock, Pretoria, 4 August 2006; Interview with Major-General Chris Thirion

<sup>162</sup> The militarization of the apartheid state under Botha is well established in the literature. See for example, L. Boulle *et al.*, *Malan to De Klerk: Leadership in the Apartheid State* (New York, 1994), 274-283; J. Cock and L. Nathan (eds). *War and Society: The Militarisation of South Africa* (Cape Town, 1989), 134-148; Davies and O’Meara, *Total Strategy*, 183-211; Frankel, *Pretoria’s Praetorian*, 46; H. M. Howe, The South African Defence Force and Political Reform, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 32: 1 (1994), 310; A. Seegers, South Africa’s National Security Management System, 1972-90, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 29: 2 (1991), 253-273; E. Njal Tjonneland, *Pax Pretoriana: The Fall of Apartheid and the Politics of Regional Destabilisation* (Uppsala, 1989), 21

<sup>163</sup> H. Hamann, *Day of the Generals: The Untold Story of South Africa’s Apartheid Era Military Generals* (Cape Town, 2001), 55; , E. De Kock, *A Long Night’s Damage: Working For the Apartheid State* (Saxonwold, 1998), 91 & 98; H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (Charlottesville, 2003), 590

<sup>164</sup> Interview with Major General Chris Thirion

<sup>165</sup> Hamann, *Day of the Generals*, 55



military's ascension to state power was described as a "bloodless coup."<sup>166</sup> The relationship between the civil and military spheres had been reversed.

## **SOUTH AFRICA'S WAR OF DESTABILIZATION**

From 1975 to 1988, the South Africa armed forces embarked on a campaign of massive regional destabilization. The campaign was an unrelenting military assault. In June 1986, the *Mission to South Africa: The Commonwealth Report: The Findings of the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group on Southern Africa* summed up the nature of Pretoria's war against its neighbours:

South Africa's intimidation of its neighbours has rested upon a persistent campaign of destabilization and economic disruption; many of its neighbours have suffered as a result. Military pressure takes many forms...It includes action within neighbouring countries, like bombings and other acts of sabotage, as well as independent military action, involving air strikes and commando raids; and sometimes it takes the form of well-planned incursions.<sup>167</sup>

The war of destabilization wrought a terrible toll on the region. The financial and human cost can not only be measured in direct damage and deaths but also in the premature deaths and projected economic loss caused by destruction of infrastructure, agriculture and power networks. While, it is very difficult to estimate the economic cost and damage, it was undoubtedly immense. One study for example, calculates that up to 1988, the total economic cost for the Frontline States was calculated to be in excess of \$US 45 billion: for example, Angola: \$US 22 billion; Mozambique: \$US 12 billion; Zambia:

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<sup>166</sup> S. Ellis, Review Essay: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, *Transformation* 42 (2000), 62

<sup>167</sup> *Mission to South: The Commonwealth Report: The Findings of the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group on Southern Africa* (Middlesex, 1986), 126-7



\$US 7 billion; Zimbabwe: \$US 3 billion.<sup>168</sup> The loss of life was also immense. The TRC underscored that:

the number of people killed inside the borders of the country in the course of the liberation struggle was considerably lower than those who died outside...the majority of the victims of the South African's government attempts to maintain itself in power were outside South Africa. Tens of thousands of people died as a direct or indirect result of the South African's government aggressive intent towards its neighbours. The lives and livelihoods of hundreds of thousands others were disrupted by the systematic targeting of infrastructure in some of the poorest nations in Africa.<sup>169</sup>

Between 1981 and 1988, an estimated 1.5 million people were (directly or indirectly) killed, including 825, 000 children.<sup>170</sup> This was the result of Pretoria sponsored insurgencies (namely, UNITA in Angola and Renamo in Mozambique) and direct military actions by the SADF. The SADF launched numerous bombing raids, armed incursions and assassinations against surrounding countries.<sup>171</sup> One notorious example was the 4 May 1978 massacre in a camp for Namibian refugees, located in the town of Kassinga, southwestern Angola, where a South African air and paratrooper attack killed hundreds of people and, also, took hundreds of prisoners.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> P. Johnson and D. Martin, *Apartheid Terrorism: A Report for the Commonwealth Committee of Foreign Ministers on Southern Africa* (London, 1989), 10

<sup>169</sup> *Repression and Resistance*, 3 & 43

<sup>170</sup> Johnson and Martin, *Apartheid Terrorism*, 10

<sup>171</sup> *Repression and Resistance*, 85-164; V. Brittain, *Hidden Lives, Hidden Deaths: South Africa's Crippling of a Continent* (London, 1988); P. Johnson and D. Martin, *Destructive Engagement: Southern Africa at War* (Harare, 1986); W. Minter, *Apartheid's Contras: An Inquiry Into The Roots Of war In Angola and Mozambique* (London, 1994), 37-53; The War Within, *Carte Blanche*, 10 June 2001, [www.beta.mnet.co.za/carteblanche/Article.aspx?Id=1750&ShowId=1](http://www.beta.mnet.co.za/carteblanche/Article.aspx?Id=1750&ShowId=1)

<sup>172</sup> Africa Watch, *Accountability in Namibia* (New York, 1992); International Defence & Aid Fund, *Remember Kassinga* (London, 1981); *Repression and Resistance*, 46-55



## CUBA'S INTERNATIONALISM

Cuba's involvement in Angola was an integral part of the foreign policy pursued by the Cuban Revolution. Havana characterized this policy as internationalism, the extensive support of national liberation and ant-imperial struggles. The specialist literature on Cuban foreign policy since the advent of the Cuban revolution in 1959, almost invariably places the emphasis on post-1959 dynamics and factors.<sup>173</sup> At the heart of these analyses lie the figures of Fidel Castro and Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. Indubitably the regional and international projection of the ideals of the Cuban Revolution was central to the thinking of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. George, for example, characterized Havana's pursuit of an activist foreign policy – internationalism as “the brainchild of its two leading figures – Fidel Castro and Che Guevara.”<sup>174</sup> However, while, Castro and Guevara were central to the construction of post -1959 Cuban foreign policy, the very conception of what should be the Cuban revolution's foreign policy drew on deeply rooted themes in Cuban history, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century wars of independence and the work of José Martí.

George argued that the Cuban government's valorization of Cuban history as a major source of Cuban foreign is a *post priori* or *post hoc* justification.<sup>175</sup> Nevertheless, the deployment of these motifs has had considerable influence in Cuba. Indeed, it is argued that the origins of internationalist themes can be traced to the early phase of the

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<sup>173</sup> For example, see H. Michael Erisman, *Cuba's International Relations: The Anatomy of a Nationalistic Foreign Policy* (Boulder, Colorado, 1985); H. Michael Erisman and John Kirk. Eds., *Cuban Foreign Policy Confronts a New International Order* (Boulder, 1985); Jorger I. Dominguez, *To Make A World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989)

<sup>174</sup> George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, 14

<sup>175</sup> George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, 17



European colonization, even before the emergence in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries of Cuban national identity. In this projection of internationalism to the period before the emergence of Cuban nationhood, Hatuey - a 15<sup>th</sup> century Taíno *cacique* (roughly chief) from the island of Hispaniola - is often identified as the first internationalist of the Columbian age.<sup>176</sup>

After resisting Spanish colonization on Hispaniola, Hatuey fled to Cuba, where he led further resistance against the Spanish. Hatuey is viewed as having other parallels in Cuban history, such as, Máximo Gómez, the military commander of the 1895-1898 War for Cuba independence, who was from the Dominican Republic. Jose Luis Carnazares Cardenas from the Nico Lopez School of Politics asserted: “Internationalism has deep roots in Cuban history. Cuba has benefited, for example, from the internationalists acts of Hatuey and Máximo Gómez.”<sup>177</sup>

While the projection of the historical roots of Cuba’s internationalism to the 15<sup>th</sup> century can be dismissed as ahistorical and presentist, it is indisputable that at the core of Havana’s conceptualization of its international obligations are the political and intellectual formulations of José Martí.<sup>178</sup> Martí, the intellectual author and main organizer of Cuba’s 1895-1898-independence war, is considered the father of the modern Cuban nation. Martí did not see himself as leading a struggle that was confined solely to Cuba. Martí viewed Cuba’s fight for its independence as part of a continental-wide struggle. For Martí the aim of war against Spanish colonial rule “was not simply fighting

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<sup>176</sup> Interview with Jose Luis Carnazares Cardenas .See also George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, 17

<sup>177</sup> Interview with Jose Luis Carnazares Cardenas

<sup>178</sup> For an excellent discussion of Martí’s influence within the Cuban Revolution see John Kirk, *José Martí: Mentor of the Cuban Revolution* (Halifax, NS: Fernwood, 2012)



to overthrow the Spanish and win political independence for Cuba but was also fighting as an international revolutionary to secure the liberation of his continent, and indeed of the world.”<sup>179</sup> This internationalist perspective resonated in Cuba and was reflected in the hundreds of Cubans who volunteered to fight against fascism during the Spanish civil war. Such was Cuba’s support for the anti-fascist cause that Jorge Risquet, a key Cuba official in Cuba’s internationalist missions, argued that in “proportion to its population at the time, Cuba was the country that sent the most volunteers to Spain.”<sup>180</sup> It was this tradition of internationalism that the Cuban Revolution would amplify and transform into an explicit sphere of state activity. Cuban historian José Canton Navarro notes that while the “Cuban people’s internationalist consciousness” was a product of Cuba’s long struggle for independence it “attained its highest expression in the work and ideals of the Cuban Revolution...”<sup>181</sup> The revolutionary government frequently publicly articulated that its pursuit of internationalism was a fulfillment of its ethical responsibilities on a world-scale and were ideals deeply rooted in the Cuban historical experience.<sup>182</sup>

Nevertheless, internationalism was also viewed as an imperative for both the survival of the Revolution and the creation of socialism. On the question of survival, Castro asserted that internationalism, apart from its ethical dimensions, also served as a means of revolutionary self-defense:

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<sup>179</sup> John Kirk, *José Martí: Mentor of the Cuban Nation* (Tampa: University Presses of Florida, 1983), 15

<sup>180</sup> Jorge Risquet, Jorge, “Defeating the South Africans,” 1-40 in David Deutschmann, *Angola and Namibia; Changing the History of Africa* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1990), 13

<sup>181</sup> José Canton Navarro, *History of Cuba: The Challenge of the Yoke and the Star* (La Habana: Editorial SI-MAR S.A., 2000) 246

<sup>182</sup> See, for example, Fidel Castro *Cold War Warnings for a Unipolar World* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2003), 49



The United States actually declared war against us. It globalized the struggle against Cuba, in order to suffocate the revolution, took the war to Latin America, Africa, Asia, everywhere. Therefore, we also globalized the revolutionary struggle against the United States. It was a question of globalizing our struggle in the face of the U.S. global struggle against the Cuban Revolution... As to the revolutionary movements, for us it was not only our duty but also a necessity.<sup>183</sup>

Che Guevara underlined this imperative in his February 24, 1965 address to the Second Economic Seminar of Afro-Asian Solidarity held in Algiers:

There are no borders in this struggle to the death, we cannot be indifferent to what happens anywhere in the world, because a victory by any country over imperialism is our victory, just as any country's defeat is a defeat for all of us. The practice of proletarian internationalism is not only a duty for the peoples struggling for a better world; it is also an inescapable necessity.<sup>184</sup>

This perspective was evident in the island's approach to Latin America. The necessity to extend the revolutionary and national liberation movement to the rest of Latin America was embodied in the First and Second Declarations of Havana adopted at two national mass assemblies on September 2, 1960 and February 24, 1962, respectively. Both rejected U.S. imperialism (especially, its embodiment in the Monroe Doctrine) and explicitly linked Cuba's destiny to the fate of continent. The First Declaration affirmed Cuba was guided by "the liberating Latin Americanism of José Martí and Benito Juárez."<sup>185</sup> The Second Declaration, a much longer and more encompassing document, argued that unity of Latin America and the necessity for Revolution was immanent in the region's shared and common history. Cuba and Latin America were seen as indissolubly linked: "What is the history of Cuba but the history of Latin America."<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 49-50

<sup>184</sup> Carlos Tablada, *Che Guevara: Economics and Politics in the Transition to Socialism* (New York: Pathfinder, 2007), 153-154

<sup>185</sup> *Declarations of Havana* (New York: Pathfinder, 2007), 27

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 39



Concomitantly, the Cuban Revolution and Latin America's redemption were inseparable. Washington's hostility to the Cuban Revolution was as much to do about Cuba as about forestalling revolution in Latin America: "By crushing the Cuban Revolution they hope to dispel the fear that torments them. By eliminating the Cuban Revolution, they hope to eliminate the revolutionary spirit of the people."<sup>187</sup> An inevitable and ineluctable uprising of the peoples of Latin America is envisaged, a regional historical catharsis presaged by the Cuban Revolution.

However, beyond the extension of revolution and anti-imperialism, the Castro government considered internationalism a crucial tool in the radical transformation of the society. The praxis of internationalism was very much entwined with the creation of the socialist ethos; it was seen as essential to the creation of a new society. In this context voluntary work, originally spearheaded by Guevara, is often considered as the principal means by which the revolutionary leadership sought to neutralize and negate capitalist values. But physically and conceptually it was not confined to activities on the island itself but also incorporated the missions carried out in other countries. Proletarian internationalism - embodied in the slogan "Workers and Oppressed Peoples of All Countries Unite!" - was integral to the development of socialist consciousness and values that would underpin the new social order. On February 24, 1985, at the Second Afro-Asian Economic Solidarity Seminar, Guevara emphasized:

Socialism cannot exist unless there is a change in people's consciousness, creating a new fraternal attitude toward humanity, both individually, within the society in which socialism is being or has been built, and in relation to the world, with respect to all of the nations that suffer imperialist aggression.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 46

<sup>188</sup> *Tablada, Che Guevara: Economics and Politics in the Transition to Socialism, 150*



In a June 7, 1972 speech, Fidel Castro emphasized the role of internationalism in the transformation of consciousness as essential to countering "[i]ndividual selfishness."<sup>189</sup> In an April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1977 speech to Cuban students in Moscow, Castro addressed to necessity to combat egoism and egotistical values, which were antithetical to building an authentic socialist society. The development of an internationalist ethos was seen as vital: "When these feelings begin to reach man's heart and conscience, then we are more than mean, egotistical individuals; we will have gone beyond individual, family and even national egoism..."<sup>190</sup> Thus, internationalist ideals were an important part of the ideological and ideational struggle to construct socialism.

## **CUBA & ANGOLA**

Cuban support for national liberation movements extended beyond Latin America, especially to African anti-colonial and national liberation movements. Diplomatic solidarity, training, military aid and other forms of concrete material assistance were provided to, for example, the National Liberation Front of Algeria in its struggle for independence from France; the Congo where Che Guevara led a guerrilla group; training material, aid and medical personnel were given to Guinea-Bissau's liberation struggle against Portugal. There was, of course, a natural affinity between the Cuban revolutionary government and the anti-imperialist and marxist-leninist rhetoric and stances of those groups that were supported.

Cuba's extensive presence in Angola was one episode –albeit a major one – in its engagement with Africa. Havana's relationship with the MPLA dated back to at least

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 149

<sup>190</sup> Fidel Castro, *Cuba's Internationalist Foreign Policy, 1975-1980* (New York: Pathfinder, 1981), 145



1965.<sup>191</sup> Diplomatic assistance and military training was provided to the MPLA. At the end of Portuguese colonial rule in 1975 there were several hundred Cuban military advisors in Angola. When South African invaded Angola in October 1975 there were 480 Cuban military instructors in Angola.<sup>192</sup> Cuba's extensive military intervention in Angola was initiated on 5 November 1975. The deployment of Cuban troops was designated *Operation Carlota*, named for an enslaved African woman who on 5 November 1843 led a revolt against slavery in Cuba.

The Cuban intervention was the direct result of the South African invasion. Facing military disaster, the MPLA issued a general proclamation that declared the necessity for "a general mobilization of all men between 18 and 45" because the "situation very serious."<sup>193</sup> It called on "All patriots to take up arms and go to front to defend the country."<sup>194</sup> Luanda also issued an international call for assistance, It made a special request to Havana. Guinea-Bissau, Guinea and Nigeria sent small troop detachments, however, Cuba was the only country to respond on a scale large enough to have significant impact. General ONambwe de Carvalho, member of the MPLA Central Committee noted: "When we decided to ask Cuba for help, we made a formal request. Fidel's response to our request went further. It went far beyond what we expected."<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> See Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, 244-254; George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, 22-23 & 28-41 & 44-48; William M. LeoGrande, *Cuba's Policy in Africa, 1959-1980* (Berkley: Institute of International Studies, 1980), 13-25

<sup>192</sup> See Fidel Castro & Ignacio Ramonet, *Cien Horas Con Fidel: Conversaciones con Ignacio Ramonet* (La Habana: Oficina del Consejo del Estado, 2006), 361; and Misión Cubana, 33

<sup>193</sup> Ryszard Kapuscinski, *Another Day of Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 94

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 94

<sup>195</sup> *Cuba! Africa! Revolution!* Documentary (London: BBC, 2007)



The first Cuban detachment consisted of 652 soldiers from an elite division. By the end of November 1975, more than 5,000 Cuban troops were in Angola. This number would rise to more than 36,000 in 1976. Among those dispatched were Cuban pilots who initially flew MPLA MiG 17s and MiG 21s. Havana also sent artillery, tanks and aircraft (MiG 23s). When the first Cuban troops began arriving the situation was critical for the MPLA. Cuba was to prove instrumental in defeating the South Africans. With South Africa forced to withdraw, Havana had won an “overwhelming victory” that “humbled in no uncertain terms” South Africa.<sup>196</sup>

Cuban involvement in Angola has often been characterized as surrogate activity for the Soviet Union, an instrument of Moscow’s foreign policy directives. The prevailing view was that Moscow “brought in Cuba troops” into Angola.<sup>197</sup> This reflects the thinking that understands the Angolan civil war solely in East-West terms. Here Cuba’s role is considered simply a function of Moscow’s contestation with Washington for influence and control over Africa.<sup>198</sup> The Ford, Carter and Reagan U.S. administrations condemned Havana for “mercenary steps carried out at Soviet request in order to ‘take advantage’ of African conflicts and bring resource-rich Africa under Soviet domination.”<sup>199</sup> However, while publicly denouncing Cuba for acting at the behest of Moscow, Washington had concluded the opposite: Cuba had made the decision

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<sup>196</sup> George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, 113

<sup>197</sup> “How a ‘war by proxy’ developed”, *The Times* 6 January 1976. See also “Russia’s African Empire,” *The Times* 14 January 1976

<sup>198</sup> Arthur Jay Klinghoffer, *The Angolan War: A Study in Soviet Policy in the Third World* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1980), 2-3

<sup>199</sup> Gordon Adams, “Cuba and Africa: The International Politics of the Liberation Struggles: A Documentary History,” 108-125 in *Latin American Perspectives* Issue 28, Vol VII N<sup>o</sup> 1, 1981, 108



to intervene on its own terms and independent of the Soviet Union. Several U.S. officials who were involved with the formation and implementation of Washington's Africa policies confirm this.

John Stockwell, the director of CIA operations in Angola during the South African invasion and in the immediate aftermath, stated “we learned that Cuba had not been ordered into action by the Soviet Union. To the contrary, the Cuban leaders felt compelled to intervene for their own ideological reasons.”<sup>200</sup> Chester Crocker, the chief U.S. diplomat in southern Africa from 1981-1989, stated that in contrast to the Soviet Union the “Cuban interest in Angola had a sharper ideological focus and a distinct logic of its own.”<sup>201</sup> Herman Cohen, U.S. assistant secretary of state for African Affairs from 1989-1993 and former African Director, U.S. National Security Council, said that in relation to Havana’s decision to intervene “[t]he Soviets were not responsible.”<sup>202</sup>

It seems that the Ford administration had concluded quite early on that Havana's involvement had been solely a Cuban decision. On February 5, 1976, the *New York Times* reported that Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State, had concluded that Cuba was “exporting revolution on its own initiative.”<sup>203</sup> Kissinger “rejected the theory held until

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<sup>200</sup> John Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies: A CIA Story* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 172

<sup>201</sup> Chester Crocker, *High noon in southern Africa*, 349, 360 & 363. See also Interview with F. Wisner, former member of U.S. State Department, in *Cuba! Africa! Revolution!*

<sup>202</sup> *Cuba! Africa! Revolution!*

<sup>203</sup> David Bender, “Kissinger Believes Cuba ‘Exports’ Revolution Again”, *New York Times* 5 February 1976



recently by most of the administration's leading specialists on Cuba that Prime Minister Fidel Castro had been forced by Soviet pressure to send the troops.”<sup>204</sup>

Cuba's independent action is strongly supported by former high-ranking Soviet Official N. Brutents. Brutents was director of the Foreign Policy Department of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and stated the Soviet government was unaware of Cuba's decision to send combat troops to Angola: “When the Cuban military forces got to Africa, they took us completely by surprise. I had no idea. I got a telegram from our ambassador in Guinea saying that Cuban forces were landing. It was a shock.”<sup>205</sup> Brutents also noted that there was discomfiture that Moscow had not been consulted beforehand: “We were not happy. We were not happy because the Cubans had acted without informing anyone first. I remember that some members of the government said: “Why didn't they ask us? They're adventurers.”<sup>206</sup>

Piero Gleijeses, in his book *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington and Africa, 1959-76*, has provided what is now widely accepted as the definitive account of the reasons Cuba became involved in Angola. On the basis of a comprehensive study of archival and declassified documents in the United States, Cuba, Britain, Belgium, and Portugal and interviews with more than 150 individuals (including CIA officials), he concluded that the Cuban government decided to dispatch combat troops to Angola after South Africa had invaded, refuting the assertion of the U.S. government (particularly those of the Ford, Carter and Reagan administrations) that South African forces

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<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>205</sup> *Cuba! Africa! Revolution!*

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*



intervened in Angola only after the arrival of the Cuban forces. Gliejeses also concluded that the Soviet Union had no role in Cuba's decision and was not even informed of it prior to deployment.<sup>207</sup> Even *The Economist*, a publication not favourably predisposed to the Cuban Revolution, acknowledged that the Cuban government acted on its "own initiative."<sup>208</sup>

Havana repeated asserted that they had intervened in Angola at the request of Luanda and independent of any directive from Moscow. For example, in an interview with Barbara Walters of ABC News (in the United States), Castro stated: "Do you want to know if the Soviets asked us to go there (to Angola)? The Soviets did not ask us. They never said a single word...It was exclusively a Cuban decision."<sup>209</sup> The late Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, a former Cuban vice-president, who was an important member of Cuba's leadership, emphasized that the deployment of troops began "as a purely Cuban operation...Cuba will go on giving the African liberation movements the help they need with or without coordination with other countries. It will be according to what we decide."<sup>210</sup>

Upon receipt of the Angolan request for assistance, the Castro government had initially planned to dispatch combat troops on November 11, the scheduled date for Angolan independence. However, the rapid South African advance precipitated the decision to start deploying troops earlier. Jorge Risquet, head of Cuba's Africa missions,

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<sup>207</sup> Gliejeses, *Conflicting Missions*, 307-379

<sup>208</sup> "Killing fields: the superpowers in Africa", *The Economist* 3-9 August 1976, 69

<sup>209</sup> Adams, *Cuba and Africa*, 119

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 119



said: “It was then that we understood that the South Africans had invaded.”<sup>211</sup> Castro asserted:

When South African regular troops invaded Angola, we couldn’t stand by and do nothing. When the MPLA asked for our help we offered them the help they needed to prevent apartheid being installed in Angola.<sup>212</sup>

Jorge Risquet, who oversaw Cuba’s Africa missions, emphasized that Luanda’s appeal

was an urgent, rapid request...The fact is that no country in Africa was in a position to send in forces with the speed, efficiency, and numbers the moment demanded. It was not simply a case of sending in a battalion. [The Republic of] Guinea sent in forces. Guinea-Bissau also sent in a small unit - in accordance with its resources. These were wonderful gestures of solidarity. But the scope of the danger required enormous forces. We sent in 36,000 men and began to push the enemy south. This required a fully fledged army, with all the necessary weapons.<sup>213</sup>

On December 22, 1975 Castro invoked internationalism to justify Cuba’s intervention:

We are carrying out an elementary internationalist duty when we help the Angolan people. We are not seeking oil, nor copper, nor iron; we seek absolutely nothing. We are simply applying our political principles. We do not fold our arms when we see an African people, our brother - that the imperialists want devoured - suddenly and brutally attacked by South Africa. We do not fold arms and we will never fold our arms!<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Misión Cubana, 21

<sup>212</sup> Estella Bravo, *Fidel: The Untold Story* documentary (New York: First Run Features, 2001)

<sup>213</sup> Jorge Risquet, “Defeating the South Africans,” 1-40 in David Deutschmann (ed.), *Angola and Namibia; Changing the History of Africa* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1989), 12-13. See also Risquet’s interview in *Cuba! Africa! Revolution!* (2007)

<sup>214</sup> Fidel Castro, *Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante En Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz, Primer Secretario Del Comité Central del Partido Comunista de Cuba y Primer Ministro del Gobierno Revolucionario, en la clausura del Primer Congreso del Partido Comunista de Cuba, celebrado en el Teatro “Carlos Marx,” el 22 de diciembre de 1975, Año del Primer Congreso* (La Habana: Departamento de Versiones Taquigraficas del Gobierno Revolucionario, 1975), 2. See also Jeffrey M. Elliot & Mervyn M.



These statements indicate an outlook that not only existed in the Cuban leadership but also among rank-and-file soldiers. This was invariably reflected in the 17 interviews conducted with Cuban veterans. They expressed their pride in extending assistance to a people in need, to have served the internationalist principles of the Cuban Revolution and to have demonstrated human solidarity. For example, Javier Dominguez, who served in Angola from 1975-77, said: “The Angolan mission was a fulfilment of our internationalist duty.”<sup>215</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Eduardo Saria Gonzalez served three tours in Angola as a combat pilot. His first tour of service was in January 1976. He stated:

When we went to Angola we felt a little like Che [Guevara]. The principles of helping another people are very important. Angola was invaded by two countries: South Africa and Zaire. They could not face those invasions, so we went. It is biblical. I am not a believer. Solidarity, friendship are biblical principles.<sup>216</sup>

This sense of internationalism was also reflected among those who served in later phases of Cuban military involvement. Moreno Hildago, who served in a tank brigade in Angola from 1987-1989, said: “I was a volunteer and understood that we were defending Angola from racist aggression.”<sup>217</sup> Another member of the Cuban armed forces explained:

Angola had freed itself from colonialism and was attacked by South Africa, so Angola asked Cuba to help against South Africa. We’ll help any poor country in need...It’s true that many comrades fell, some from my own unit, people who’d been with me in the army. It’s sad

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Dymally, *Fidel Castro: Nothing Can Stop the Course of History: Interview by Jeffrey M. Elliot and Mervyn M. Dymally* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1986), 173-174.

<sup>215</sup> Interview with Javier Dominguez, Havana, 12 May 2006.

<sup>216</sup> Interview with Lieutenant Colonel Eduardo Gonzalez Saria, Havana, 9 May 2006

<sup>217</sup> Interview with Luis Moreno Hildago, Havana, 28 April 2006



but we all have to do die one day. And to die for the freedom and independence of a country is to die for a just cause.<sup>218</sup>

The issue of race was also directly engaged. The revolutionary leadership openly located the Angolan mission within Cuba's history of slavery. The military intervention was justified as both defending an independent country against foreign invasion and repaying an historical debt owed by Cuba to Africa as a result of slavery and the slave trade. This was reflected in the decision to name the mission *Operacion Carlota*, in honour of the 5 November 1843 slave revolt. Fidel Castro frequently evoked Cuba's historical links to Africa at several prominent occasions where traditional policies and directions were re-affirmed or new policies and directions announced. For example, at the the April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1976 gathering to mark the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory at *Playa Giron* (Bay of Pigs), he declared that Cuba was a Latin-African nation:

Those who once enslaved man and sent him to America perhaps never imagined that one of those peoples who received slaves would one day send their fighters to struggle for freedom in Africa...We are a Latin-American people...<sup>219</sup>

Castro was the not the only one in the leadership circles to express these sentiments. Risquet was also unambiguous in explaining Cuba's military intervention in terms of Cuba's commitment to Africa.<sup>220</sup> However, George argued that Havana's invocation of an historical debt owed by Cuba to Africa was opportunistic and manipulative.<sup>221</sup> Nevertheless, the sentiment of indebtedness to Africa was not a discourse that existed only

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<sup>218</sup> Bravo, *Fidel: The Untold Story*

<sup>219</sup> Fidel Castro, *Cuba's Internationalist Foreign Policy, 1975-1980* (New York: Pathfinder, 1981), 110 & 115. See also Fidel Castro, *2<sup>nd</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba: Documents and Speeches* (Havana: Editora Politica, 1981), 55

<sup>220</sup> Risquet, *Defeating the South Africans*, 13

<sup>221</sup> See George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, 145



among the top leadership. It resonated with the Cuban public, especially black Cubans who were able to make symbolic connection with their African roots. While George argued that these sentiments were manipulated by Havana, there is no doubt that there are enduring themes, motifs and traditions of Cuban history that link Cuba and Africa. As Terrence Cannon noted that for many black Cubans volunteering was akin to defending Cuba except that the fight was “this time in Africa. And they were aware that Africa was, in some sense, their homeland.”<sup>222</sup>

Reverend Abbuno Gonazalez of the *Cuban Pentecostal Church* served in Angola and was able to make both a symbolic and concrete connection: "My grandfather came from Angola. So it is my duty to go and help Angola. I owe it to my ancestors.”<sup>223</sup> General Rafael Moracen, who is black, stated:

When we arrived in Angola, I heard an Angolan say that our grandparents, whose children were taken away from Africa to be slaves, would be happy to see their grandchildren return to Africa to help free it. I will always remember those words.<sup>224</sup>

Whether Cubans, as a whole, freely volunteered or were coerced into participating in the military mission continues to be debated.<sup>225</sup> The research of this author points to the voluntary participation of Cubans in the military mission. Eduardo Sarria Gonzalez, who served three tours in Angola stated: “If you decided not to go it was not a problem.” He, also, added (reflecting a universal concern of *machismo*): “But you might not get a

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<sup>222</sup> Terence Cannon, *Revolutionary Cuba* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1981), 182

<sup>223</sup> Estella Bravo, *After the Battle* (Havana: Bravo Films, 1990)

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> See George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, 146-148



woman.”<sup>226</sup> Moreno Hildago, who served in a tank brigade in Angola from 1987-1989, said: “I was a volunteer and understood that we were defending Angola from racist aggression.”<sup>227</sup> Carlos Fundora who served in Angola from 1985-87 stated, “up to the last minute, you had the right to say you weren’t going. There was one *compañero* who afterwards said he wasn't going.”<sup>228</sup>

There were also cases of people who, though turned down for military service in Angola, still attempted to smuggle themselves to Angola. One of the most famous instances is that of Esther Lilia Diaz Rodriguez. She had repeated been rejected on the basis that “it is much harder there for a woman.”<sup>229</sup> As she was preparing to smuggle herself aboard a troop ship, she was granted official permission to go. Her experience was a reflection of the sexism in Cuban society. While women could serve as nurses, journalists or technicians, there existed “conventional wisdom” that outright military roles, especially combat, was not only not suitable for women but not in keeping with their abilities. This, of course, directly contradicted the history of women combatants during the 1956-1953 Revolutionary War and the programs instituted by the *Federación de Mujeres Cubanas* (Federation of Cuban Women). Eventually the leadership intervened resulting in the deployment of several anti-aircraft battalions that were solely comprised of women.

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<sup>226</sup> Interview with Lieutenant Colonel Eduardo. Havana, 9 May, 2006

<sup>227</sup> Interview with Luis Moreno Hildago. Havana, 28 April, 2006

<sup>228</sup> Carlos Fundora, "Carlos Fundora," 70-91 in Lynn Geldof, *Cubans: Voices of Change* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 74-76

<sup>229</sup> Gabriel Garcia Marquez, “Operation Carlota,” 41-60 in David Deutschman (ed.), *Changing the History of Africa: Angola and Namibia* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1989), 50



## **CHAPTER TWO: THE ROAD TO CUITO CUANAVALÉ**

Angola bore the full weight of Pretoria's policy of regional military intervention through a series of South African military operations launched against it, from 1975 to 1988. Pretoria deemed the interventions imperative because an independent Angola was considered a direct threat to South African control of Namibia, and by extension the apartheid state. Angola became the strategic area in South Africa's drive for regional hegemony. The interventions reached the most intense level in 1987-88. The focus of this chapter and the next is the 1987-88 military engagements that eventually centred on the Angolan town of Cuito Cuanavale. This Chapter concentrates on the lead-up to the battle of Cuito Cuanavale. This necessitates asking a number of interrelated questions, for example: Why did Pretoria intervene? What were its objectives? Did it ever intend to capture Cuito Cuanavale? Why and under what conditions did Havana intervene?

Engaging these questions and constructing a narrative requires navigation through interviews, memoirs, documents and accounts from the two warring sides and their allies, as well as the articles in the contemporary major western, South African and liberation movement newspapers and magazines. Among other documents, of particular interest are the declassified documents of the United States Defence Intelligence Agency, consisting of two briefing reports on the conflict. The Reagan administration was a close ally of the Botha regime, and these documents reflect the information that was shared between Pretoria and Washington. Interviews with Angolan Generals Jorge Dumba and Antonio dos Santos and other Angolan soldiers are also important sources.

However, the most detailed firsthand accounts come from Cubans and South Africans sources, serving as very important primary sources. South African accounts are more comprehensive in the treatment of each phase of the conflict. The personal experiences of SADF officers and soldiers form the main substance of these accounts.



The most substantial is the series of extensive interviews conducted by Frederick Bridgland with SADF officers. The SADF high command granted Bridgland, former southern African correspondent for *The Sunday Telegraph*, unprecedented access to personnel who fought in Angola during 1987-88. His compilation of interviews and commentary is considered the SADF authorized version of the conflict. Colonel Jan Breytenbach's commentary is invaluable as he was not only a high-ranking SADF officer but also privy to the decisions and decision-making process of the SSC and SADF general staff. These two are the most authoritative and comprehensive South African accounts. They are supplemented by other South Africans memoirs and interviews conducted with SADF officers and soldiers.

Most interestingly, at the highest decision-making levels of the Botha regime, SADF Chief General Geldenhuys' memoirs only dealt in depth with events from August to October 1987. He does not address the siege of Cuito Cuanavale in any detail. The interview with Major General Chris Thirion, Deputy-Director of SADF Intelligence Services, offered a different perspective on the aspects that Geldenhuys does cover and a window on those he does not. Illuminating further the decisions made at this state echelon are the minutes of the meetings of the SSC. Although neither stenographic, verbatim nor an otherwise complete record of what was said and discussed, and despite being heavily edited, the minutes nevertheless provide significant insight into the decisions, aims and concerns of the Botha regime.

From the Cuban side, there are numerous speeches and several memoirs by officers, soldiers and officials, who were directly involved. However, none of these, by itself, represents a sustained or detailed treatment. The sole exception is the classified Cuban armed forces report on the battle. This constitutes the longest and most detailed official Cuban description, and includes verbatim renderings of the discussions at the



Cuban leadership level. The primary focus of official Cuban accounts falls on strategic issues and on what are deemed to be crucial moments in the confrontation, rather than a detailed treatment of each phase. The many Cuban memoirs provide the personal dimension by detailing various individual experiences.

Taken separately, Cuban and South African accounts would provide a one-sided, limited, fragmented and inherently untrustworthy narrative. However, taken together they provide the material upon which to assemble a coherent and plausible account of the battle, the intent and goals of the various parties, and the actual outcome. Where, given the diametrically opposed vested interests, sharp and irreconcilable contradictions would be anticipated, instead remarkable agreement and coincidence is found on key aspects among the overwhelming majority of the Cuban and South African accounts. In many critical areas of the various accounts, the descriptions and evaluation of what occurred converge. What distinguishes them is emphasis. South African accounts focus on valour, *esprit de corps* and fighting qualities of the South African troops, Cuban accounts on strategic issues.

### **SOUTH AFRICAN INVASIONS OF ANGOLA, 1975-1986**

As Portuguese rule in Angola began to fade, SWAPO's fortunes were enhanced. General Geldenhuys underscored that Angola was now a threat to South African control of Namibia as SWAPO now had the "springboard for renewed infiltration."<sup>230</sup> SWAPO was now able to establish a presence and bases inside Angola. This made access to Namibia much easier because "a much shorter route awaited insurgents of SWAPO's People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) on their way home."<sup>231</sup> Increasing

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<sup>230</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 58

<sup>231</sup> Seegers, *The Military in the Making*, 116



numbers of prospective recruits crossed over from Namibia to the SWAPO bases inside Angola. This influx of new people was estimated to be around 6,000.<sup>232</sup> By November 1974, “SWAPO camps of up to seventy men were already in place.”<sup>233</sup>

Initially South Africa adopted a policy of covert intervention in Angola against the MPLA through financing and supplying both the UNITA and the *Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola* (National Front for the Liberation of Angola, or FNLA). The collapse of the 21 January 1975 Alvor Agreement, which proposed a transitional government encompassing the MPLA, FNLA and UNITA, resulted in the outbreak of civil war. As the fighting intensified, Pretoria increased the level of its support to the FNLA and UNITA. Weapons and money were sent. This was followed by the dispatching of military instructors because the SADF had successfully argued for greater and more direct South African involvement as the necessary condition for success.<sup>234</sup>

U.S. involvement paralleled growing South African intervention, resulting in close cooperation. In 1975, as the Portuguese were in the process of withdrawing from Angola the U.S. government had already begun to manoeuvre, in order to stop the MPLA from ascending to power by funding UNITA and FNLA.<sup>235</sup> Henry Kissinger (then U.S. Secretary of State) coordinated U.S. efforts with South Africa. Vorster had

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<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>233</sup> Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, 272. See also D. Geldenhuys, *The Diplomacy of Isolation: South African Foreign Policy Making* (New York, 1984), 75-6.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 294-295

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 276-299. See also; N. Ashford, “Can the West Afford to lose out in the power struggle for Angola?”, *The Times* [London], 11 November 1975; P. Gleijeses, Cuba and the Independence of Namibia, *Cold War History*, 7: 2 (2007), 287



consulted Washington on his decision to support UNITA and FNLA.<sup>236</sup> Despite the extensive assistance by South Africa and the United States, the FNLA and UNITA were unable to defeat the MPLA. An MPLA victory seemed inevitable.

At this juncture Pretoria decided to launch a pre-emptive invasion. Pretoria saw Angola as the most direct and greatest threat facing South Africa, and it was in Angola that it decided to act with the most direct and greatest urgency, otherwise, a policy of non-interference “would without doubt encourage a takeover by a pro-communist force friendly to SWAPO.”<sup>237</sup> *Die Burger*, the influential Afrikaner nationalist newspaper, characterized the situation in Angola as “the tremendous struggle between the forces of order and chaos in Southern Africa.”<sup>238</sup> General Geldenhuys succinctly summed up Pretoria’s fear: “war was now on its doorstep.”<sup>239</sup>

Washington also encouraged Pretoria to “intervene militarily against the MPLA.”<sup>240</sup> The decision to invade was made without consultation of the Parliament or the full cabinet and was not made public.<sup>241</sup> The decision was driven by then-Defence

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<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 290; J. Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies: A CIA Story* (New York, 1978), 188; K. Danaher, *The Political Economy of U.S. Policy Toward South Africa* (Boulder, 1985), 131-2

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 279 & 294-299

<sup>238</sup> Quoted in Hallett, *The South African Intervention*, 357

<sup>239</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General’s Story*, 51

<sup>240</sup> Danaher, *The Political Economy*, 115; C. A. Crocker, *High Noon In Southern Africa: Making Peace in a Rough Neighborhood* (New York, 1992), 49; A. Gavshon, *Crisis in Africa: Battleground of East and West* (New York, 1981), 243 Seegers, *The Military in the Making*, 211; M. Wolfers and J. Gergol, *Angola in the Frontline* (London, 1983), 8

<sup>241</sup> N. Ashford, “S Africa’s wall of silence on Angola”, *The Times*, 20 November 1975; F. Bridgland, “Mystery of South African accent in armoured units”, *The Times*, 15 November 1975; W. E. Jones, “Captured South African Soldier tells journalists of his unit’s role in Angola civil war”, *The Times*, 9 January 1976; Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, 302; R. S. Jaster, *South Africa’s Narrowing Security Options* (London, 1980),



Minister Botha and the SADF general staff.<sup>242</sup> The goal was to protect Namibia by preventing the formation of an MPLA government by installing either UNITA or FNLA in power.<sup>243</sup> The 1977 White Paper on Defence stated that the invasion was necessary to protect Pretoria's control of Namibia "in order to deflect the effects of the Angolan civil war from the Northern border of South West Africa and inhibit SWAPO's efforts to capitalize on the unstable situation in the southern region of Angola."<sup>244</sup> There were also broader ideological and geopolitical considerations. The SADF submission to the TRC stated the objective was to halt "further Soviet-led expansion in the region."<sup>245</sup>

On August 22-23 1975, South Africa occupied the Calueque Dam in southern Angola. The August incursion laid the basis for a major invasion that was launched on October 14 1975. Code-named *Operation Savannah*, the invasion involved four battle groups of 2,000 – 3,000 troops. They went into combat with Angolan allies from UNITA and FNLA. Angola was also invaded from the North as troops from Zaire joined the FNLA. Pretoria also provided military advisors to the FNLA/Zairean formations, which totalled 3,000 soldiers.<sup>246</sup> By the end of the operation the SADF had deployed 4000 to 5000 soldiers. The South African operation was divided into four distinct but

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25; A. Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa: The Story of the Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (London, 1990), 305; SA four held by MPLA, *Rand Daily Mail*, 18 December 1975

<sup>242</sup> Geldenhuys, *The Diplomacy of Isolation*; Hallett, *The South African Intervention*, 365-6; Seegers, *The Military in the Making*, 210; Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa*, 304-5

<sup>243</sup> J. North, *Freedom Rising* (New York, 1986), 211; A. Seidman, *Apartheid, Militarism and the U.S. South East* (Trenton, 1990), 51-52; *Repression and Resistance*, 45.

<sup>244</sup> *White Paper on Defence 1977*, 6. See also Interview with Magnus Malan, in *Cuba! Africa! Revolution!* (London, 2007). Documentary.

<sup>245</sup> *Repression and Resistance*, 21

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, 310



overlapping phases. The first three focused on clearing FAPLA from the approaches to Luanda, the Angolan capital: securing the border-area, the south and centre of Angola, respectively. The fourth and final phase “provided for the capture of Luanda, the ultimate military objective.”<sup>247</sup> The objective was for both invading forces to eventually unite and occupy Luanda before 11 November 1975. The capture of Luanda before 11 November was considered imperative, as it was date set for the official declaration of Angola’s independence. Whoever had control of Luanda (the MPLA or an UNITA/FNLA coalition) would have the political advantage and a greater chance of being recognized as the legitimate government by the international community.

Facing the South African advance from the south and a Zaire supported FNLA attack from the north, the MPLA found itself in a perilous situation. The South Africans were better equipped (in terms of weapons and transport) and trained than their FAPLA counterparts. They also enjoyed air supremacy.<sup>248</sup> At one point, *The Times* (London) reported that the FNLA was only 18-miles from Luanda.<sup>249</sup> As previously noted in Chapter One, the MPLA called for “a general mobilization of all men between 18 and 45” as the “situation is very serious.”<sup>250</sup> To counter the situation, Luanda made a specific request for assistance from Havana.

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<sup>247</sup> Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, 301; Hallett, *The South African Intervention*, 366-71

<sup>248</sup> Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, 300; Ryszard Kapuscinski, *Another Day of Life* (New York, 2001), 85; “Massive armoured column thrusts deep into Angola”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 22 December 1975; “Foreigners leave Angola to its fate”, *The Times*, 4 November 1975; “Leftist lose two big towns in Angola”, *The Times*, 5 November 1975

<sup>249</sup> “Foreigners leave Angola to its fate”, *The Times* 4 November 1975; “Leftist lose two big towns in Angola,” *The Times*, 5 November 1975

<sup>250</sup> Kapuscinski, *Another Day of Life*, 94



As noted in Chapter One, on 5 November 1975 Havana began Operation *Carlota*, leading to the deployment of 36,000 troops, MiGs, tanks and artillery. This military force transformed the balance of power on the ground. The South Africans were stopped, and then forced to retreat from Angola. On 27 March 1976, the last South African troops withdrew from Angola into Namibia.<sup>251</sup> Pretoria's decision to withdraw was prompted not only by the SADF's inability to overcome Cuban/Angolan resistance and the success of the Cuban/Angolan counter-offensive but also by the collapse of concrete U.S. support for the ongoing campaign. On December 19 1975 and January 27 1976 the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of representatives voted 54 to 22 and 323 to 99, respectively, to support Senator Richard Clarke's measure to suspend any financial or material support for any "military or paramilitary operations in Angola."<sup>252</sup> Pretoria had hoped to obtain more sophisticated weapons systems to use against the Cuban and Angolan forces.<sup>253</sup> The Clarke Amendment dashed those wishes. The collapse of U.S. support was reflected in Washington's decision not to veto the 31 March 1976 UN Security Resolution 367 condemning South Africa's invasion, which was adopted by a vote of 9 to 0, with the U.S. abstaining.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> South Africa Condemned for Aggression against Angola; Full Compensation Demanded, *UN Monthly Chronicle*, 13:4 (1976), 5

<sup>252</sup> J. Franklin, *Cuba and the United States* (New York, 1997), 14; Seegers, *The Military in the Making*, 220

<sup>253</sup> Geldenhuys, *The Diplomacy of Isolation*, 77. See also N. Ashford, "South African Cabinet discusses danger of confrontation as MPLA races onward in Angola", *The Times*, 12 February 1976; N. Ashford, "Will South Africa go to War?", *The Time*, 13 February 1976; Gavshon, *Crisis in Africa*, 243; R. Walker, "Vorster warns on Angola", *Rand Daily Mail*, 25 December 1975

<sup>254</sup> South Africa Condemned for Aggression against Angola; Full Compensation Demanded, *UN Monthly Chronicle*, 13:4 (1976), 5



Despite the South African withdrawal, Havana apparently wanted to continue to pursue the South African forces into Namibia in order to end the South African occupation and establish Namibian independence.<sup>255</sup> However, the Castro government did not carry out its planned military offensive because Moscow opposed any such action, refusing to provide any support because of concerns that such an action could provoke direct U.S. intervention to prevent the defeat of South Africa.<sup>256</sup>

### **THE ANGOLAN LYNCH PIN**

Despite the failure of the invasion, Pretoria deemed Angola to be not only a key arena in the contestation between apartheid and anti-apartheid forces but also the most critical one outside of South Africa. This preoccupation is reflected in F. W. De Klerk's account of the first cabinet meeting he attended in April of 1978. According to De Klerk "[t]he normal agenda was set aside" to determine to what extent South Africa should intervene in Angola to preserve its control of Namibia.<sup>257</sup> The designation of Angola as a central theatre of struggle to preserve the apartheid regime was formally codified in two documents approved by the SSC in March 1979 unambiguously articulating and encapsulating Pretoria's policy towards Angola for the following decade. Central to this approach was the dislodging of the MPLA. The first document established the long-term goal of overthrowing the MPLA and instituting South African control of the country.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> See F. Castro, *Protagonistas de la Victoria* (Havana, 2005), 7; F. Castro and I. Ramonet, *Cien Horas Con Fidel: Conversaciones con Ignacio Ramonet* (La Habana, 2006), 365; Interview with Officer of Cuban Armed Forces, Havana, 10 May 2006 (The officer wished to remain anonymous because he was not an official spokesperson for the Cuban Armed Forces)

<sup>256</sup> Castro, *Protagonistas*, 7; Castro and Ramonet, *Cien Horas Con Fidel*, 365

<sup>257</sup> De Klerk, *The Last Trek*, 58-9

<sup>258</sup> *Repression and Resistance*, 55



The second was much more specific, focusing on the short-term actions that were considered essential to eliminating the MPLA. To achieve this “the political situation in Angola would be kept as unstable as possible...”<sup>259</sup> It authorized a series of clandestine operations in Angola and support for UNITA, which included actions to “disrupt the national infrastructure of Angola...”<sup>260</sup> There were four elements to this strategy:

- a. Subjecting southern Angola to a national strategy for as long as it takes to pressure the MPLA to abandon its support for SWAPO;
- b. Enlisting UNITA and other movements as partners against the Marxist onslaught;
- c. Destroying SWAPO bases in Angola through coordinated actions;
- d. Making preparations for conventional operations against Angolan, Cuban and SWAPO forces.<sup>261</sup>

An integral element of this strategy was establishing a UNITA government in southern Angola as the direct prelude to the “partition of Angola” into two separate countries: a MPLA controlled north and a UNITA south.<sup>262</sup> As UNITA played a central role in this stratagem, its preservation was considered essential. The SSC and SADF viewed UNITA’s survival as contingent on and directly tied to the fate of its leader, Jonas Savimbi. The centrality of UNITA and Savimbi to the apartheid regime is further demonstrated by a March 6, 1979 letter by SADF Chief Magnus Malan to Maj. Gen. Earp, head of SADF Operation. Malan declared that Savimbi’s “continued existence

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<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 55

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 56

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, 56

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, 56



directly influences the future of Southern Africa. He has become so important that we will have to ensure his safety.”<sup>263</sup>

Toward this end, the Botha regime devoted considerable resources and planning to the destabilization of the MPLA, with the SADF intervening in Angola throughout the 1980s to preserve UNITA and prevent its defeat – and even destruction – from several FAPLA offensives. During the 1980s, the SADF launched several military invasions. *Operation Skeptic* occurred in 1980; and was followed by *Operation Protea* in 1981. *Operation Protea* was the archetype for the other operations that followed. The subsequent SADF interventions were extensions of the objectives of *Operation Protea*. *Operation Protea* was a direct attempt to implement the SSC directives of March 1979. Under *Operation Protea*, the SADF launched an invasion of southern Angola with the aim of seizing Cunene and Cuando Cubango provinces, thereby establishing a region under UNITA control. *Protea* was followed by a series of interventions: *Daisy* in 1981; *Super* and *Meebos* in 1982; *Phoenix* and *Askari* in 1983. In 1985, *Operation Boswilger* was launched in response to a FAPLA offensive against UNITA, leading to the capture of Jamba, the provincial capital of Cuando Cubango. These interventions were not limited incursions. They amounted “to full-scale invasions involving armored cars, fighter bombers and large detachments of troops.”<sup>264</sup> These repeated invasions resulted in a South Africa military presence in the province of Cunene that lasted until 1988.

The largest, longest and most intensive intervention took place in August 1987 under *Operation Modular*. It was to last into July 1988, with the South African appellations changing from *Operation Modular* to *Operation Hooper* to *Operation*

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<sup>263</sup> *Ibid*, 56

<sup>264</sup> C. Coker, *South Africa's Security Dilemmas* (Washington, 1987), 143



*Packer* and, finally, to *Operation Displace*.<sup>265</sup> The military contestation, which began as an SADF response to a FAPLA offensive against UNITA in Cuando Cubango province, eventually centred on the south-eastern Angolan town of Cuito Cuanavale in a siege and series of battles that lasted from October 1987 to April 1988. It was to end in a military standoff on the Angola-Namibia frontier.

### **THE 1987 FAPLA OFFENSIVE**

In the first half of 1987, the MPLA government initiated a substantial rearmament program. Luanda refitted and rearmed several FAPLA brigades with significant deliveries of new Soviet weapons, particularly T-55 and T-62 tanks and MiG fighter aircraft. The refitting and rearmament were in preparation for a summer offensive in Cuando Cubango province that was planned for August 1987. While the exact size of the supplies for 1987, materiel and financial value, is not known, the Soviet archives provide an indirect indication of the level of the military assistance. From 1976 to February 1989, Moscow delivered to Luanda military equipment worth 3.7 billion roubles. Using the estimated exchange value for the Soviet rouble, this would amount to US\$1.48 billion US.<sup>266</sup> The annual average for the period would be approximately 284 million roubles (US\$113.6 million). Given, the preparations being made for a major FAPLA offensive, it is reasonable to assume that the actual value of the military supplies provided would have exceeded - probably quite considerably - the 284 million rouble average. For comparison purposes, the Soviet documents indicate that in 1989, 600 million roubles

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<sup>265</sup> See Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 209

<sup>266</sup> Calculation based on S. Deger and S. Sen, *Military Expenditure: The Political Economy of International Security* (Oxford, 1990), 67



(US\$240 million) worth of military supplies were delivered to Angola.<sup>267</sup> As this was the year after the principal military confrontations, it appears logical to conclude that the value of the military supplies for the 1987, the year of the FAPLA offensive, would have been equivalent, if not much larger.

The 1987 offensive was the largest and most complex military operation initiated by FAPLA. The objective of the offensive was to wrest from UNITA's control the towns of Jamba and Mavinga in Cuando Cubango province. Jamba served as the headquarters of UNITA. Mavinga was an important communications and transport node, whose strategic value was enhanced by its airstrip. The capture of these towns would have cut-off South African supply routes to UNITA, dealing a significant - if not decisive blow - to UNITA's capacity to operate effectively in southern Angola.

It has been asserted that the Cuban forces were directly involved in the planning and execution of the FAPLA offensive.<sup>268</sup> For example, the SADF Chief of Staff General Jannie Geldenhuys described the offensive as "the Cuban-FAPLA advance."<sup>269</sup> However, the evidence indicates that the Cubans were not involved in the Angolan offensive, except to register their strong opposition. Havana had had serious reservations about the efficacy of the military operation. This was reflected in the very definite points of divergence between the Cuban and Soviet military assessment of the

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<sup>267</sup> V. Shubin, *The USSR and Southern Africa during the Cold War: Occasional Paper No. 1* (Bologna, 2008), 7; International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 1986-1987* (London, 1987), 114

<sup>268</sup> E.g. W. M. James, *A Political History of the Civil War in Angola, 1974-1990* (New Brunswick, N.J, 1992), 172-174 and Seegers, *The Military in the Making*, 254.

<sup>269</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 237. See also comments by Chief of South African Army General Meiring in Hamann, *Day of the Generals*, 93-9



Angolan situation. These differing perspectives and even disagreements are attested to by Cuban and U.S. sources.

Havana has repeatedly stated that the offensive was initiated in accord with Soviet military advice and that they had no role in its planning or implementation. Various Cuban officials and documents consistently and unambiguously affirm the Cuban opposition to the offensive. The detailed Cuban armed forces internal report on the war in Angola states that the FAPLA offensive was launched “in accord with Soviet military advice.”<sup>270</sup> Castro stated several times that Havana disapproved, describing it on one occasion as a military operation that “we had nothing to do with” and one “with which we did not agree.”<sup>271</sup> On another occasion he said that the Cubans were quite clear in expressing their opposition to the Soviets and Angolans on the matter, telling them: “Don’t count on us.”<sup>272</sup>

The Cuban denial that they had any role in the planning or execution of the offensive is supported by declassified U.S. documents and the assessment of Chester Crocker, Washington’s chief diplomat in Africa. The consensus in Washington was that Havana was not involved. In a memorandum of 11 May, the United States Defense Intelligence Agency characterized the FAPLA operation as “[t]he Soviet, Cuban and Angolan strategy...”<sup>273</sup> However, in the later fuller report of 12 December 1988, this

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<sup>270</sup> Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias, ‘Misión Cubana en Angola: proeza militar y ejemplo para todos los tiempos’, in *Preparación Martiana-Marxista-Leninista para el Personal de las FAR: Segundo Periodo de Instrucción* (Havana, 2005), 33

<sup>271</sup> J. G. Blight et al., *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, The Missile Crisis and the Soviet Collapse* (New York, 1993), 245

<sup>272</sup> Castro, *My Life* (New York, 2007), 327

<sup>273</sup> *Briefing Regarding Developments in the Military Situation in Angola Since July 1987* (United States Defence Intelligence Agency, 11 May 1988), 1 & 3 [declassified; hereafter cited as USDIA Briefing (11 May 1988)]



assessment changed. The FAPLA operation was now solely described as both a “Soviet designed” and a “Soviet planned offensive.”<sup>274</sup> Chester Crocker in his memoirs echoed this assessment referring to the offensive as “the sweepingly ambitious Soviet-Angolan military plan,”<sup>275</sup> in which the Cubans “played only a minimal role.”<sup>276</sup>

This reflected not only Cuban non-participation in but also a serious disagreement on the viability of the military operation. The planning of the offensive exposed the different perspectives that existed between Soviet and Cuban military advisors. Soviet military advisors not only advocated the offensive but, also, developed the strategic framework. Cuban military advisors had opposed the operation from the outset, arguing that it was strategically mistaken. In an understatement of Havana’s objection, Jorge Risquet said that the offensive “may not have been well-planned.”<sup>277</sup>

Cuban opposition centered on two issues. First, Cuban military advisors had advised against the offensive because it would create the opportunity for a significant South African intervention, which in turn would place the Angolan forces in a precarious situation. Jorge Risquet, who worked closely with Luanda, argued that the “FAPLA offensive took very little regard or consideration of what the enemy forces would or could do,” and did not have enough military force “to confront a South African intervention.”<sup>278</sup> Consequently, the Cuban armed forces (FAR) decided not to participate

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<sup>274</sup> *The 1987-88 Combat in Southern Africa: Lessons Learned* (United States Defence Intelligence Agency, 12 December 1988) 1 & 3 [declassified; hereafter cited as USDIA *Lessons Learned* (12 December 1988)]

<sup>275</sup> Crocker, *High noon in southern Africa*, 349, 360 & 363

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 356

<sup>277</sup> Interview with Jorge Risquet, in D. Deutschmann (ed.), *Changing the History of Africa: Angola and Namibia* (Melbourne, 1989), 30

<sup>278</sup> *Misión Cubana*, 33



in the offensive. This conflicts with George's assertion that the Cuban forces had received authorization "to become involved in the 1987 offensive."<sup>279</sup>

Havana asserted that the offensive was the origin of the crisis that would grip FAPLA in 1987-88.<sup>280</sup> Castro underscored that the Cuban military had always been opposed to these offensives against Jamba, because South Africa invariably:

intervened at the last moment with its modern air power, its powerful artillery and its armoured forces able to inflict such heavy losses on the Angolan troops - and they couldn't be stopped, We discussed this matter with the Soviets and the Angolans every year: 'Don't carry out X offensive, don't get into such wasting, costly and finally pointless offensives. And count us out if you do.'<sup>281</sup>

Crocker's memoirs clearly indicate that the Reagan administration were very much aware of the strong differences between the Cuban and Soviet advisors. He noted that Havana "did not share Soviet assumptions about likely countermoves; a debate had broken out over probable SADF ground and air responses to yet another FAPLA thrust toward Mavinga and Jamba. The Cubans argued against the 1987 Soviet-Angolan battle plan..."<sup>282</sup> Pretoria, through its intelligence operations had its own independent knowledge of the Cuban disagreement with the Soviets. Riaan Labuschagne, who served in the headquarters of South Africa's National Intelligence Service (NIS), stated that he had recruited Colonel Anatoly Polozok, the Soviet military attaché at the Soviet Embassy in Botswana. Polozok informed Labuschagne of the disagreement over the planned August 1987 offensive. Polozok said that if the military operation went ahead, the Cuban

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<sup>279</sup> George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, p 199

<sup>280</sup> *La Paz de Cuito Cuanavale: Documentos de un proceso* (La Habana, 1989), 3

<sup>281</sup> Castro, *My Life*, 326

<sup>282</sup> Crocker, *High noon in southern Africa*, 356



advisors “predicted defeat by the South Africans.”<sup>283</sup> This view of Soviet-Cuban disagreement was also reflected in several contemporary media reports.<sup>284</sup>

Cuban military advisors argued that Moscow did not appreciate the differences between the Angola and Europe. Soviet advisors relied heavily on the experience of the Second World War, mechanically transplanting strategy and tactics. Castro stated that Moscow adopted an “academic concept”<sup>285</sup> rather than a realistic appraisal of what was required in Angola. The Soviet military approach in Angola was guided by “military conceptions that were appropriate for a European theatre of war.”<sup>286</sup> Castro emphasized that the Soviets “believed they were fighting the battle of Berlin, with Zhukov in command, and with thousands of tanks, with 40,000 artillery guns...They did not understand, nor could they understand the problems of the Third World, the theatre of the fight and the kind of war that we had to fight in this scenario.”<sup>287</sup>

The Soviet focus was on large-scale operations that involved concentrating troops and materiel, and then directing those concentrations against various targets. Cuban military advisors argued that this was neither suitable nor applicable to Angola, stressing that mobility and flexibility were necessary. They argued that large-scale operations were too ponderous for southern Angola and would create severe logistical problems. Lieutenant Colonel Eduardo Sari Gonzalez observed: “The problem with Soviet advisers was the fact that they under-appreciated any other forum or theatre of fighting other than

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<sup>283</sup> R. Labuschagne, Riaan, *In South Africa's Secret Service: An Undercover Agent's Story* (Albertyon, 2002), 112

<sup>284</sup> E.g. K. Maier, *The Military Stalemate, Africa Report*, May-June 1988, 34

<sup>285</sup> Castro, *My Life*, 323

<sup>286</sup> Misión Cubana, 33. See also USDIA *Lessons Learned* (12 December 1988), 10

<sup>287</sup> H. Lopez Blanch, *Cuba: pequeño gigante contra el Apartheid* (La Habana, 2008), 68



the frontlines on a European scale. They were not open to the reality that Africa was different.”<sup>288</sup> Jorge Risquet, the main Cuba representative in Angola, observed:

For many years our military thinking in Angola did not agree with the Soviet advisers, who were brilliant at taking Berlin during the Second World War, they did not understand what had to be done in Angola. But the Soviets were the advisers of the MPLA. The Soviets, not the Cubans. They called the shots, but we did not agree. We left it up to them. We did not control Angola, the MPLA or the USSR. We kept out of it.<sup>289</sup>

Cuban objections aside, it also appears that both the United States and South Africa anticipated an offensive in the summer of 1987. Launching military operations at that time of year was considered to be the FAPLA *modus operandi*, as reflected in the United States Defence Intelligence Agency’s December 12, 1988 memorandum, noting: “the Angolan government has launched annual dry season offensives against the UNITA base area in recent years.”<sup>290</sup> Washington’s and Pretoria’s anticipation of the offensive was not only based on past experience but, also, on specific foreknowledge of FAPLA’s military plans for 1987. Crocker stated that in July 1987, Washington “became aware that dos Santos [president of Angola] had decided to mount a long-planned military offensive against UNITA.”<sup>291</sup> He further indicated that Washington had known of the operation by at least 2 July 1987.<sup>292</sup> As already mentioned, Pretoria also had foreknowledge of the planned FAPLA offensive, though the Colonel Anatoly Polozok, the Soviet official recruited in Zambia by the South African intelligence service.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> Interview with Lieutenant Colonel Eduardo Saria Gonzalez, Havana, 9 May 2006

<sup>289</sup> *Cuba! Africa! Revolution!* (Londo, 2007), Documentary

<sup>290</sup> USDIA *Lessons Learned* (12 December 1988), 2

<sup>291</sup> Crocker, *High Noon In Southern Africa*, 347

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, 348-349

<sup>293</sup> Labuschagne, *In South Africa’s Secret Service*, 112



While, Crocker did not indicate the actual source or means by which the information was obtained, it seems plausible, given the close relationship between the Reagan and Botha governments, that this information would have been shared between Pretoria and Washington. Whether, Washington or Pretoria had acquired their information independently or in co-operation, clearly the Angolan military operation did not catch either by surprise.

Despite Cuban objections, the FAPLA offensive, designated *Saudação de Outubro* (October Salute) was launched on 10 July 1987. With the small southeastern town of Cuito Cuanavale in the province of Cuando Cubango as the staging area, the FAPLA offensive set out from two directions (see Map 2). The goal was to catch UNITA in a pincer movement. One arm of the pincer proceeded from the east, the other from the southeast. Eight brigades - the 8th, 13th, 16th, 21st, 25th, 47th, 59th, and 66th - were deployed with more than 150 tanks. The 21<sup>st</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 47<sup>h</sup> and 59<sup>th</sup> were considered the elite formations in FAPLA, and spearheaded the drive.

The exact number of troops committed by Luanda to the offensive is difficult to ascertain. Unlike the Cuban and South African militaries, there exists no detailed record or registry of the number of Angolans who served and fought in the battles that were waged in the 1970s and 1980s. FAPLA was comprised of soldiers who were recruited *en masse* from villages and other communities. The resources and infrastructure for precise recordkeeping were not available. Susan Hurlich, an advisor to the MPLA in the 1980s and early 1990s, noted: "FAPLA was largely an unregistered army."<sup>294</sup> The official SADF account, estimated that at least 10,000 were deployed.<sup>295</sup>

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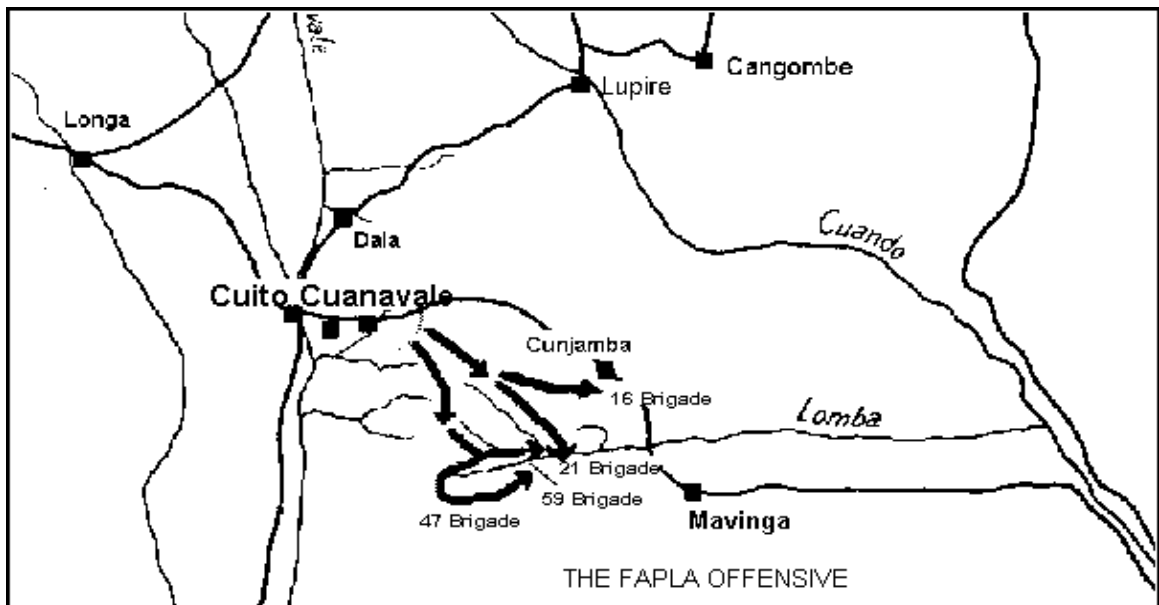
<sup>294</sup> Interview with Susan Hurlich, Havana, 3 May 2007

<sup>295</sup> Quoted in Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 150



Though forewarned by Pretoria, UNITA was unable to repel the offensive and was forced to retreat. The SADF noted that the FAPLA offensive against UNITA had achieved “speedy progress,”<sup>296</sup> The U.S. Defence Intelligence Agency described the offensive as “impressive,”<sup>297</sup> and noted that the “offensive seriously challenged UNITA’s base region.”<sup>298</sup> As the FAPLA operation continued, UNITA was further driven back and was on the verge of defeat. With UNITA in retreat, the first critical phase of the campaign was reached as the FAPLA units approached Mavinga in the south of Cuando Cubango province in pursuit of retreating UNITA forces.

**Map2: FAPLA 1987 July offensive.**<sup>299</sup>



## SOUTH AFRICAN INTERVENTION

As UNITA’s military position deteriorated, Pretoria grew increasingly worried, viewing the developing Angola situation as a direct threat to its regional interests. The defeat of

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, 122

<sup>297</sup> USDIA *Briefing* (11 May 1988),2

<sup>298</sup> USDIA *Lessons Learned* (12 December 1988), 3

<sup>299</sup> Source: <http://www.rhodesia.nl/cuito.htm>



UNITA would have meant its end as a force in Angola and a severe blow to the SSC objective of removing the MPLA and establishing a compliant regime. The *Washington Post* and *New York Times* both linked South African military intervention to Pretoria's immediate objective of preventing the defeat of UNITA by the Angolan armed forces.<sup>300</sup> This assessment is supported by a number of statements made during and after the intervention by leading generals and representatives of the apartheid regime. In a November 1987 press conference, General Geldenhuys, SADF Chief of Staff, acknowledged that South Africa had intervened to prevent the defeat of UNITA. Magnus Malan told the South African parliament that given the situation "we have no choice."<sup>301</sup> Colonel Jan Breytenbach wrote that the SSC decided, "to pull Savimbi's chestnuts out of the fire."<sup>302</sup> General Meiring was quite succinct: "Savimbi couldn't stop the MPLA, so we had to."<sup>303</sup>

The Botha regime cast the intervention as an imperative and unavoidable necessity to protect South African regional security interests, and South Africa itself. For example, Geldenhuys tied the invasion to broader issue of maintaining control of Namibia, which was essential to protecting South Africa from armed incursions. An SADF officer underscored the centrality of UNITA to Pretoria's regional ambitions: "If

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<sup>300</sup> E.g. W. Claibourne, "S. African military says intervention in Angola staved off rebel defeat", *Washington Post*, 13 November 1987; D. Crary, "Win over Marxist forces leaves Savimbi ecstatic", *Washington Times*, 13 November 1987; M. Hornsby, "Pretoria and Unita dispute battle credit", *New York Times*, 13 November 1987; and B. E. Trainor, "Angola Drive on the Rebels is said to fail", *New York Times*, 22 November 1987.

<sup>301</sup> M. Verbaan, "Battle which could change the course of Angola's war", *The Weekly Mail*, 2 - 9 October 1987

<sup>302</sup> J. Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers: The Story of South Africa's 32 Battalion 1976-1993* (Johannesburg, 2003), 72

<sup>303</sup> Hamann, *Day of the Generals*, 55



Savimbi takes over Luanda our war would be over.”<sup>304</sup> Colonel Gerhard Louw, an SADF ground force commander at the time, emphasized that the intervention was driven by Pretoria’s determination to put UNITA in a superior tactical and strategic position and, thus, “entrench Savimbi’s control of southern Angola.”<sup>305</sup> This was a prerequisite for maintaining Pretoria’s grip on Namibia. A UNITA defeat would render Namibia more vulnerable to SWAPO infiltration. Geldenhuys justified the intervention on the basis that it prevented “Swapo from activating the east and West Caprivi and Kavango.”<sup>306</sup> He emphasized that the “capture of UNITA’s headquarters would render northeast Namibia vulnerable to SWAPO incursions from Angola and open new routes for ANC guerillas to infiltrate South Africa from Angola.”<sup>307</sup> He went on to add that: “The Defence Force’s action is in line with the policy of the South African government to protect its own interests wherever and whenever necessary.”<sup>308</sup>

Broad consensus existed within the regime for military action to preserve UNITA and avoid a major setback to its regional goals. Any challenge to South African control of Namibia was considered a challenge to the apartheid itself: a more vulnerable Namibia meant a more vulnerable South Africa. In his May 17, 1988 address to the South African parliament, Defence Minister Malan defended the military intervention on the same basis, arguing that

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<sup>304</sup> P. Van Niekerk, “Strangely, this battle may lay a path to peace”, *The Weekly Mail* 20 – 26 November 1987

<sup>305</sup> Interview with Colonel Gerhard Louw, Commander of SADF 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Kimberly, 27 July 2006

<sup>306</sup> P. Laurence, “Now its head-on conflict as SA tackles Soviet forces”, *The Weekly Mail*, 13-19 November 1987

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*



last year's events in South Eastern Angola had the South African government facing two options, *i.e.*, that of allowing the communist surrogate forces and the Fapla army to destroy Unita or of trying to help Unita with South Africa forces. Faced by *[sic]* these choices, the Government decided on the latter, if we had decided on the former, Unita could have been brought to its knees. That would have cleared the way for the infiltration of communist forces, the ANC and Swapo terrorists into South West Africa/Namibia's whole northern and eastern territory. These forces of violence and terrorism could then have spilled over into the neighbouring states in Southern Africa, even bringing them to within striking distance of the Transvaal.<sup>309</sup>

The date of the SADF intervention remains to be established. However, it seems that by the middle of August the SADF was involved in the fighting in Angola through operations carried out by the elite 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion,<sup>310</sup> increased military supplies to UNITA and air-strikes on FAPLA positions. This can be inferred from various sources. Cuban sources have identified 17 August as date when the first South African artillery barrage was unleashed against the Angolan forces.<sup>311</sup> On the South Africa side, Malan in his 18 May 1988 parliamentary presentation on the South African military intervention, mentioned "the past nine months when the SA Defence Force was involved there [Angola]".<sup>312</sup> This implicitly indicated that SADF involvement began in August 1987. Geldenhuys supported this dating, stating in his memoir that in August 1987 the SADF began to extend military support for UNITA.<sup>313</sup>

At the end of August, the South African Air Force (SAAF) was bombing FAPLA positions, advancing columns and supply routes. By September 1987, officially

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<sup>309</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard* 17 May 1988, 10011; "Malan: Cuban troops cowards", *The Star*, 18 May 1988

<sup>310</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 118

<sup>311</sup> E.g. Blanch, *Cuba: pequeño gigante*, 68

<sup>312</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, 17 May 1988, 10102

<sup>313</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 212



designated as *Operation Modular*, the SADF military engagement escalated to significant ground-force deployment. In the November 1987 press conference, Geldenhuys was quite vague on the actual date when troops were committed, merely stating: “In recent days elements of the South African Defense Force and the South West African Territorial Force were compelled to take limited action against surrogate forces.”<sup>314</sup> According to the Bridgland’s SADF authorized account, the 61<sup>st</sup> Mechanized Battalion was assembled in southern Angola on 7 September, in preparation to attack the FAPLA 47<sup>th</sup> Brigade. On September 17, the 61<sup>st</sup> launched its counter-offensive.<sup>315</sup> Two declassified documents of the U.S. Intelligence Agency pin-point mid-September as the time of SADF troop deployment.<sup>316</sup> In a later press conference, Geldenhuys admitted that Pretoria had militarily intervened with troops in September 1987.<sup>317</sup>

## **SADF NUMBERS**

The eventual deployment of ground-forces in a combat role encompassed nine divisions with five regular white detachments. The deployment included the following battalions: the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion (the “Buffalo,” soldiers made up of recruited Angolans), 61<sup>st</sup> Mechanized, 4<sup>th</sup> South African Infantry, 20<sup>th</sup> South African Infantry, 91<sup>st</sup> and the 101<sup>st</sup> special-forces battalions. In September 1987, the SADF account mentions the deployment of 126 vehicles, including 55 Ratels (armoured troop carriers) and 62-supply

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<sup>314</sup> R. Dowden, “SA military admits fighting alongside Unita in Angola”, *The Independent*, 12 November 1987

<sup>315</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 121 & 124

<sup>316</sup> USDIA *Briefing* (11 May 1988), 2 and USDIA *Lessons Learned*, 12 December 1988, 1

<sup>317</sup> D. Crary, “General describes SA role in Angola”, *The Independent*, 9 April 1988; J. D. Battersby, “South Africa Gives Details of Angola Military Role”, *New York Times*, 20 April 1988



trucks.<sup>318</sup> Arrayed alongside were units of UNITA and the SWATF. The consensus is that the SADF operation was the largest military invasion of Angola since 1975.<sup>319</sup> The May 11, 1988 U.S. Defence Intelligence Agency report stated that UNITA was “backed up by unprecedented levels of South African support.”<sup>320</sup> *The New York Times* described the South African intervention as “biggest single engagement since its troops fought in World War II.”<sup>321</sup> The black South African newspaper *The Sowetan* characterized the eventual siege of Cuito Cuanavale as “the biggest ever battle fought in southern Africa.”<sup>322</sup> Several post-conflict academic accounts even went so far as to characterize the SADF invasion as the largest military operation on the African continent since the North African battles waged during the Second World War.<sup>323</sup>

This qualitative consensus is not, however, paralleled by a quantitative consensus. The actual number of South African troops deployed during the intervention from September 1987 to withdrawal in August 1988 remains controversial and difficult to determine. Differing assertions have been made about the actual numbers involved in the South African intervention. Pretoria always insisted that not more than 3,000 SADF soldiers were deployed during the entire 1987-88 conflict. For example, in a 16 May 1988 address to the South African Parliament, Malan said that the numbers of SADF

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<sup>318</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 118-121

<sup>319</sup> E.g. Brittain, *Death of Dignity*, 34; Pazzanita, *The Conflict Resolution Process*, 102-103

<sup>320</sup> USDIA *Briefing* (11 May 1988), 4

<sup>321</sup> J. F. Burns, “Hints That Repression May Lead to Reform”, *New York Times*, 7 February 1988

<sup>322</sup> “The Agony of Angola”, *The Sowetan*, 2 May 1988

<sup>323</sup> Campbell, *Cuito Cuanavale*, 187; Collelo, *Angola*, 205; Pazzanita, *The Conflict Resolution Process*, 103; Vanneman, *Soviet Strategy in Southern Africa*, 55



troops “never exceeded 3,000.”<sup>324</sup> On several occasions, Geldenhuys repeatedly stated a maximum of 3,000 SADF and SWATF troops were involved at any one point in the 1987-88 conflict.<sup>325</sup> Helmoed-Romer Heitman, who served in the South African armed forces, also stated that the numbers never exceeded 3,000.<sup>326</sup>

The U.S. Defence Intelligence Agency’s 12 December 1988 report indicated a somewhat higher number was involved, stating that in mid-September 1987 South African troops numbered “almost 3,500.”<sup>327</sup> Given the close cooperation and intelligence exchanges between Pretoria and Washington, this figure must be given some credence. Nevertheless, what is of note is that this figure is for mid-September and does not include the arrival of re-enforcements as the SADF expanded its role in the campaign.<sup>328</sup> For example, Bridgland implied that eventually more than 3,000 South African soldiers were involved as the conflict developed, writing that in November 1987 there were “scarcely 3,000 men at that stage.”<sup>329</sup> Havana, Luanda and the ANC have insisted that at the height of the conflict, at least, 9,000 troops were deployed (*i.e.*, more than three times the figure admitted by Pretoria). Colonel Stuart Watson, a former MK fighter who was present at Cuito Cuanavale throughout the battle, is adamant that South African

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<sup>324</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, 16 May 1988, 9932

<sup>325</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General’s Story*, 212

<sup>326</sup> H-R Heitman, *War in Angola: The Final South African Phase* (Gibraltar, 1990), 7

<sup>327</sup> *USDIA Lessons Learned* (12 December 1988), 8

<sup>328</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General’s Story*, 212 & 232. See also D. Crary, “General describes SA role in Angola,” *The Independent*, 9 April 1988; J. D. Battersby, “South Africa Gives Details of Angola Military Role”, *New York Times*, 20 April 1988

<sup>329</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 230



reinforcements raised the number of SADF troops to between 8,000 or 9,000 troops.<sup>330</sup> Several reports in western newspapers placed the size of the South African force within that range. For example, Karl Maier, South African correspondent for *The Independent* and *The Christian Science Monitor* put the size of the SADF force at 8,000.<sup>331</sup> The *Washington Post* quoted the higher figure of 9,500.<sup>332</sup>

These higher numbers reflect the rumours pervading South Africa at the time. For example, Jacobus van der Merwe, a Conservative Party member of the South African Parliament, noted the rumours circulating “that between 15,000 to 20,000 of our troops are involved.”<sup>333</sup> However, while General Chris Thirion said only 3,000 to 4,000 troops were deployed, he also emphasized that the operation involved directly or indirectly (in combat and in support functions) at least 20,000 troops.<sup>334</sup> A higher estimate than 3,000 also appears to be justified by the fact that Pretoria deployed at least 6 battalions at the beginning of the South African intervention. A battalion was usually comprised of three to five companies, with each company having 200-300 troops. Thus, a battalion’s strength was usually around 1,000 soldiers. Extrapolation would, therefore, place the size of the initial South African intervention at approximately 6,000 troops. With later reinforcements and support troops, the figure of 9,000 does not seem to be improbable. Nevertheless, while it may be difficult to precisely pin down the actual numbers, the

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<sup>330</sup> Interview with Colonel S. Watson, Johannesburg, 24 July 2006

<sup>331</sup> Maier, *The Military Stalemate*, 35

<sup>332</sup> “Long Official Silence is Finally Ending on Cuba’s ‘Faraway War’”, *Washington Post*, 12 August 1988

<sup>333</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, 17 May 1988, 9950

<sup>334</sup> Interview with Major General Chris Thirion



intervention was both the largest deployment of the SADF in Angola and the largest military operation launched during the apartheid era.

### **FAPLA DÉBÂCLE & SURVIVAL**

The deployment of South African combat formations transformed the military situation. The SADF, in conjunction with UNITA, launched a counter-offensive, halting the Angolan armed forces at the Lomba River. FAPLA sustained considerable casualties and loss of equipment as they tried to stem and stop the SADF advance. The South Africans estimated that by November they had destroyed more than 400 vehicles, including 90 tanks and armored vehicles.<sup>335</sup> It is in the loss of life that the impact of the SADF intervention is revealed. Due to its unregistered nature, the actual levels of FAPLA loss of life are difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, it is clear from testimonies from both sides of the conflict that the loss of life by the Angolan forces was quite extensive.

On 3 October alone, the SADF estimated that it had killed 600 Angolan soldiers.<sup>336</sup> SADF Major Perre Franken who observed the fighting on October 3 stated: “I felt sorry for them [FAPLA soldiers]. The MRL [multiple rocket launchers] ripples were inflicting devastating casualties among them.”<sup>337</sup> Colonel Breytenbach described the “slaughter” as “awful.”<sup>338</sup> Another SADF officer Mac da Trinidad noted that the FAPLA soldiers “were mown down like grass.”<sup>339</sup> The U.S. Intelligence Agency calculated that some FAPLA units had “suffered losses of 20-25 percent,” which when

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<sup>335</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 224

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, 141

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, 148

<sup>338</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 282

<sup>339</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 161



extrapolated amounted to “10-15 per cent of the entire” Angolan army.<sup>340</sup> Malan put the Angolans losses at 7,000 to 10,000.<sup>341</sup> Cuban sources corroborate that FAPLA suffered significant and extensive casualties. Cuban Brigadier General Ernio Hernandez Rodriguez, who served in Angola stated, “the Angolan forces had suffered great losses in personnel and material.”<sup>342</sup> Fidel Castro noted that the FAPLA “was hit hard by South Africa, and the Angolans suffered heavy losses of both men and the brand-new armoured equipment that had been supplied by the Soviets....”<sup>343</sup> The scale of carnage and destruction is also attested to by those who not only were there in Angola at the time but also partisans of the MPLA. Susan Hurlich, who worked with the MPLA, estimated that “thousands of Angolan soldiers perished in the effort to stop the South Africans.”<sup>344</sup> Colonel Stuart Watson observed that: “It was a meat market for the SADF when it came to FAPLA soldiers.”<sup>345</sup>

Soviet military planning contributed to the high death toll. By insisting on massed attacks, the Soviet military advisers ensured a high level of casualties. Watson argued that the excessive human toll was the direct result of the strategy employed by FAPLA, which “was the tactic of sending wave after wave of troops.”<sup>346</sup> He attributed this to the strict adherence to Soviet advice. Often without prior preparation, Angolan soldiers, both

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<sup>340</sup> USDIA *Lessons Learned*, 12 December 1988, 8

<sup>341</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, 16 May 1988, 9932

<sup>342</sup> Interview with Brigadier General Ernio Hernandez Rodriguez’, in L. Baez (ed.), *Secretos de los Generales: Declasificado* (La Habana, 1996), 393

<sup>343</sup> Castro, *My Life*, 327

<sup>344</sup> Interview with Susan Hurlich

<sup>345</sup> Interview with Colonel Stuart Watson,

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*



veterans and new recruits, were sent into the fighting. Cuban Lieutenant Colonel Saria Gonzalez observed this deficit in training, stating that the “Angolans were very brave. They had a lot of fighting experience but very little training. They went straight to the front.”<sup>347</sup> Magnus Malan echoed this assessment by Watson and Saria Gonzalez, underscoring FAPLA’s profligacy in the face of the joint South African and UNITA counterattack:

You had the Soviet doctrine coming through, hard and clear: you don’t stop, you attack, you attack, you attack. You do the same thing. You get a hiding everyday. But you couldn’t care less. You come. You come. That’s what happened. First of all, they threw in 21<sup>st</sup> battalion. It got a hiding. Then they threw in 59<sup>th</sup> battalion. It got a hiding. Then they threw in 47<sup>th</sup> battalion. It got a hiding. Then they withdrew.<sup>348</sup>

Forced onto the defensive by the South African assault, the Angolan brigades received on 5 October 1987 the order to fall back to a new defensive line in the north.<sup>349</sup> Eventually the brigades were forced into a full retreat to Cuito Cuanavale, from which the FAPLA offensive was launched. The SADF followed in hot pursuit with the goal of destroying the Angolan brigades.<sup>350</sup> With the Angolan forces in full flight, the SADF attempted to encircle the brigades and cutoff their route of retreat. To ensure a successful retreat to Cuito Cuanavale, the FAPLA brigades had to reach and cross the Chambinga Bridge, which spanned the Chambinga River. The SADF’s goal was to catch and surround the brigades before they arrived at the bridge. The 61<sup>st</sup> mechanized, the 4<sup>th</sup> South African Infantry and 20<sup>th</sup> South African Infantry spearheaded the drive to

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<sup>347</sup> Interview with Eduardo Saria Gonzalez

<sup>348</sup> *Cuba! Africa! Revolution!*

<sup>349</sup> *Misión Cubana*, 33

<sup>350</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 224



ensnare the retreating Angolans. Several encirclement attempts failed, with the brigades eluding the pursuing South Africans. In retrospect, the escape of the Angolan brigades was a key moment in the 1987-88 conflict. In his discussion of this SADF intervention, George, however, does not mention the successful FAPLA flight from destruction and the failed SADF pursuit.<sup>351</sup> If these brigades had been destroyed, the SADF would have had an unopposed path to Cutio Cuanavale.

After these repeated failures, General Geldenhuys ordered a halt to the offensive, due to the increased concerns about South African vulnerability to the Angolan deployment of MiG fighter aircraft. Captain Piet van Zyl, an officer of a 32nd Battalion Company, stated that the SADF commanders “were afraid of attacks by MiGs.”<sup>352</sup> Thus, despite having suffered significant casualties and loss of equipment, the 21<sup>st</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 47<sup>h</sup> and 59<sup>th</sup> FAPLA brigades were not destroyed. Though greatly diminished in their fighting capabilities, they had escaped to Cuito Cuanavale and assumed new defensive positions along the eastern banks of the Cuito and Cuanavale rivers, where they “concentrated their forces.”<sup>353</sup> Cuito Cuanavale was located near the confluence of the Cuito and Cuanavale rivers. Due to the particular bends and sinuous route of the Cuito River, the town of Cuito Cuanavale’s position was to the west of that river, which flowed from north to south.

The SADF high command viewed the escape of the Angolan brigades with consternation. South African officers were chastened, with many stating that their failure had permitted the FAPLA brigades to survive “to fight again yet another day and kill

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<sup>351</sup> George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, p 209-210

<sup>352</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 223

<sup>353</sup> Interview with General Jorge Dumba, *Testimonies of the 1987-88 Heroic Battles of Cuito Cuanavale* (Pretoria, 2004).



more South Africans and soldiers.”<sup>354</sup> Notwithstanding their success in breaking the Angolan offensive and inflicting substantial casualties, the SADF command considered FAPLA’s survival to be a serious setback. By failing to encircle and, thus, destroy the brigades an opportunity had been missed to inflict an overwhelming defeat. The SADF had failed to convert a tactical success into a strategic *coup de grâce*. Some SADF officers viewed this as the critical moment in the whole conflict. Colonel Breytenbach posited that had the SADF successfully completed its plan of encirclement and destruction then “the Cuito Cuanavale campaign would probably have had a different outcome...”<sup>355</sup> With the elimination of the elite FAPLA military formations, Cuito Cuanavale would have been left defenceless, as there would be no significant concentration of forces to resist a South African advance.

The FAPLA command attributed the escape to a well-executed retreat. Fidel Castro concurred, stating that the Angolans had retreated “in an orderly manner.”<sup>356</sup> The United States Intelligence Agency agreed, using very similar wording, acknowledging that “Fapla withdrew under pressure in an orderly manner towards Cuito Cuanavale.”<sup>357</sup> In contrast, SADF officers were convinced the Angolan brigades had only survived due to South African errors and incompetence. The question of determining who was responsible – in other words, on whom the blame for failure should be placed – resulted in recriminations being exchanged among SADF officers. In his SADF-authorized

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<sup>354</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 217

<sup>355</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 285

<sup>356</sup> Castro, *My Life*, 327

<sup>357</sup> USDIA *Lessons Learned* (12 December 1988), 9



account, Bridgland noted that a serious argument - “a terrible storm”<sup>358</sup> – broke out in the SADF campaign headquarters, with several commanders allocating blame and assigning responsibility for “the critical mistakes”<sup>359</sup> that had resulted in the FAPLA escape. Colonel Breytenbach placed the blame on the commanding officer of the 4<sup>th</sup> South African Infantry who had hesitated “for reasons best known to him” to cross the Chambinga River, swing round behind the Angolan brigades and prevent their retreat by blocking the escape route.<sup>360</sup> He, therefore, missed the opportunity to destroy the brigades, instead allowing them “a reasonable chance to reach safety.”<sup>361</sup> In short, “the bottom line” was that he had failed in his mission.<sup>362</sup> For this dereliction, Breytenbach declared that the commanding officer should have been immediately dismissed.<sup>363</sup>

With the escape of the FAPLA brigades, the SADF general staff ordered a pause in the offensive. Nevertheless, some officers argued that halting the offensive was a mistake, and by failing to press their advantage the SADF had let an opportunity to inflict a rapid and devastating defeat on the FAPLA slip from their grasp. For example, Captain van Zyl said he “felt despairingly. We should have pressed on the following day and taken everything out.”<sup>364</sup> Fidel Castro lent his support to this evaluation. In a 1988 meeting in Havana with members of the ANC leadership, Castro noted: “The SADF was

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<sup>358</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 217

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, 217

<sup>360</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 285

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, 285

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, 290

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, p 285

<sup>364</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 223



far too cautious and missed a remarkable opportunity.”<sup>365</sup> Exhausted by the retreat and the beating they had suffered, the FAPLA brigades were quite vulnerable to an attack. Moreover, they were still in the process of assuming and entrenching themselves in new defensive positions in and around Cuito Cuanavale and were quite unprepared to face a new SADF offensive.

However, whatever opportunity may have existed for a rapid and decisive victory was tempered in Pretoria’s eyes by the logistical problems facing the SADF. Against the objections of officers in the field, the general staff decided that the continuation of the offensive drive would wait until the resolution of those problems. The 61<sup>st</sup> mechanized, the 4<sup>th</sup> South African Infantry and 20<sup>th</sup> South African Infantry required re-supply and fresh troops. Ammunition had to be replenished, and vehicles repaired and replaced. The mental state of the troops presented a more serious problem. Despite the damage and decimation they had inflicted on the Angolan military, SADF morale “was low.”<sup>366</sup> Many of the soldiers expected to end their tour of duty in Angola before Christmas. The prospect of a prolonged campaign did not appeal to them. SADF Colonel Deon Ferreira captured the South African dilemma:

Ideally we should have finished the job with the old troops. But, on the other hand, many of them had seen more action in three months than many South African soldiers saw in the whole of the *[sic]* World War II. Fighting spirit was down...A lot of equipment needed replacing. And anyway there was no real choice once the general told the troops they would be home before Christmas. It would have been very difficult to remotivate those guys.<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> R. Kasrils, “Turning point at Cuito Cuanavale”, *The Sunday Independent*, 23 March 2008

<sup>366</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 224

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid.*, 227



Coupled with the logistical and morale problems were the strategic impasse challenges. The unexpected survival and resilience of the FAPLA brigades and their successful retreat to Cuito Cuanavale signaled a new phase in the conflict. After more than two-months of fighting, they now faced an enemy who was now, after the SADF pause, “well deployed and dug in” around Cuito Cuanavale.<sup>368</sup> As the conflict settled into the siege of Cuito Cuanavale, Pretoria publicly admitted for the first time that the South African armed forces were in Angola, but describing the ongoing fighting as solely involving UNITA and FAPLA forces. The official stance was to refuse comment on “unsourced and speculative stories”<sup>369</sup> claiming direct South African involvement. Nevertheless, Pretoria was forced to admit the SADF presence. In an early November 1987 press conference, General Geldenhuys officially confirmed South Africa had intervened in Angola.<sup>370</sup>

Having failed to destroy the brigades as a fighting force, the SADF general staff confronted the question of how to proceed. In response, in early November, P.W. Botha, accompanied by members of the SSC, paid a surprise 24-hour visit to the Angolan front. This sortie to the frontlines was unprecedented, attesting to the serious impasse that now faced the SADF. The European Community condemned Botha’s visit as a “provocative action that can only aggravate the situation in southern Africa and impede the development of regional dialogue.”<sup>371</sup> *The Sunday Times* described the visit as an attempt

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<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, 224

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, 211

<sup>370</sup> R. Dowden, “SA military admits fighting alongside Unita in Angola”, *The Independent*, 12 November 1987; A. Klaaste, “War - the first casualty is truth”, *The Sowetan*, 16 November 1987; and P. Laurence, “Now its head-on conflict as SA tackles Soviet forces”, *The Weekly Mail*, 13 – 19 November 1987

<sup>371</sup> Q. Peel, “EC hints at SA action in Angola”, *Financial Times*, 24 November 1987



to boost morale among the South African troops.<sup>372</sup> However, besides raising the soldiers' spirits, Botha's main aim was to assemble the SADF general staff and the ground commanders, and discuss with them the plan for the next phase of military actions. Defense Minister Malan declared that Pretoria's objective was to "once and for all' defeat the Angolan armed forces and lead to 'the turning point' in the Angolan war."<sup>373</sup>

### **DID THE SADF INTEND TO CAPTURE CUITO CUANAVALÉ?**

This strategy session proved crucial. Botha and other members of the SSC together with the SADF general staff and ground force officers decided that it was still possible to deliver a decisive blow to the Angolan armed forces, and resolved to continue the SADF offensive with the objective of destroying the FAPLA formations around and in Cuito Cuanavale. Most importantly, this objective encompassed the capture of the town.

Central to the competing narratives of the conflict is the question of whether Pretoria ever intended and attempted to capture Cuito Cuanavale. This dispute is at the heart of the differing evaluations of the outcome of the conflict. If the SADF never intended to capture the town, then the holding of the town by FAPLA did not represent a significant failure or defeat of South African military strategy. However, if the SADF's goal was the seizure of Cuito Cuanavale, then the Angolan ability to retain control of the town constituted a major *débâcle* for Pretoria. Not surprisingly the "answer" by the apartheid regime and the anti-apartheid forces diametrically diverge.

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<sup>372</sup> P. Godwin, "Botha in war zone", *The Sunday Times*, 15 November 1987. See also *South Africa 1988-89: Official Yearbook of South Africa* (Pretoria, 1989), 214 and South African Institute of Race Relations, *Survey of Race Relations in South Africa 1986/87* (Johannesburg, 1988), 520

<sup>373</sup> J. Jones, "Botha in visit to troops as casualties rise", 16 November 1987; Angola: South African Setback, *Africa Confidential*, 28: 23 (1987), 1-2



For the anti-apartheid forces it was clear that the SADF's goal was to capture Cuito Cuanavale. On this point, the South African liberation movement's literature is unanimous. This was the position articulated in the reporting of the ANC's *Sechaba* and *Umsebenzi*,<sup>374</sup> and the SACP's *The African Communist*.<sup>375</sup> Even *The Resister*, the banned but clandestinely circulated journal of the Committee for South Africa War Resistance, primarily published by former SADF conscripts, stated that the capture of Cuito Cuanavale lay at the heart of SADF strategy.<sup>376</sup> The numerous Cuban accounts echo this stance, revolving around their assertion that the SADF's intention and repeated attempts to capture the town were what shaped Cuba's eventual entry into the conflict.<sup>377</sup> Several prominent non-South African anti-apartheid scholars have asserted that the capture of the town was the South African military objective.<sup>378</sup>

This stance is also reflected in the contemporary reporting of major newspapers in the west and South Africa. For example, *The New York Times* identified South Africa's goal as "to take the town and secure its heavy-duty runway and the strategic

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<sup>374</sup> See, for example: Pretoria's War In Angola, *Sechaba* February 1988, 3; The Battle for Angola: Fidel Castro Speaks, *Sechaba* November 1988, 2-5; B. Magubane, US Policy In Southern Africa: The Reagan Era, *Sechaba*, December 1988, 25; Editorial: The Solution Of The Regional Conflict In Southern Africa, *Sechaba* September 1988, 1; and Cuito Cuanavale: Turning Point In Southern Africa, *Umsebenzi*, 'IV', (1988), 3

<sup>375</sup> Editorial Notes, *The African Communist*, N<sup>o</sup>. 116, 19; and Cato, Apartheid Armed Forces in Crisis, *ibid.*, 21

<sup>376</sup> Editorial, *Resister: Journal of the Committee for South Africa War Resistance*, N<sup>o</sup>. 54, (1988), 18-19

<sup>377</sup> See for example: Baez (1996); *La guerra de Angola* (La Habana: Editora Politica, 1989); *La paz de Cuito Cuanavale: documentos de un proceso* (La Habana: Editora Politica, 1989); & Misi3n (2005)

<sup>378</sup> See for example, Brittain, *Death of Dignity*, 35; Herbstein and Evenson, *The Devils Are Among Us*, 171; and Pazzanita, *The Conflict Resolution Process*, 103



main roads to the north.”<sup>379</sup> Another article plainly stated that the SADF “tried to capture Cuito Cuanavale.”<sup>380</sup> A 28 July 1988 front-page story focused on the SADF drive seize to the town.<sup>381</sup> Several other articles in other western were written in this vein.<sup>382</sup> This was also the track taken by the South African newspapers, *The Sowetan* and *The Weekly Mail*. On 28 January 1988, *The Sowetan* reported that a major battle was being waged for Cuito Cuanavale.<sup>383</sup> Several articles in *The Weekly Mail* discussed the seizure of Cuito Cuanavale as being at the center of SADF strategy.<sup>384</sup>

The SADF intent to capture the town appears to be acknowledged, at least implicitly, by an 11 May 1988 declassified briefing report of the United States Defence Intelligence Agency. This report indicated that Washington understood that Cuito Cuanavale’s capture was on Pretoria’s agenda. Given the close collaboration between the Reagan and Botha regimes, the conclusion of this report is salient in determining

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<sup>379</sup> J. Raath, “The War in Angola: Luanda forces braced for South African onslaught”, *The Times* 1 March 1988

<sup>380</sup> B. E. Trainor, “South Africa’s Strategy in Angola Falls Short, Enhancing Cubans Role”, *New York Times*, 12 July 1988

<sup>381</sup> J. Treaster, “Castro faults Soviet tactics in war in Angola”, *New York Times*, 28 July 1988

<sup>382</sup> See “Angola’s deadly stalemate”, *The Economist* 27 February 1988; “Aliquid novi: Angola”, *The Economist*, 19 March 1988; C. Nickerson, “Turning Point In A Civil War? Angolans, Rebels Fight What May Be Pivotal Battle”, *Boston Globe*, 26 April 1988; and “The Battle For Key Town Turns in Favour Of Angola”, *Sydney Morning Herald* via Reuters, 19 May 1988

<sup>383</sup> “Bloody Battle Rages in Angola”, *The Sowetan*, 28 January 1988

<sup>384</sup> See for example: P. Van Nieverk, “January’s Cuito victory turns into February’s stalemate”, *The Weekly Mail*, 26 February - 3 March 1988; Margaret Knox, “Angola arranges a rare tour of the battlefields”, *The Weekly Mail*, 11 - 17 March 1988; P. Van Niekerk, “Pik puts a big damper on Angolan settlement hopes”, *The Weekly Mail*, 18 - 24 March 1988; and Peter Vale, “The lesson of Cuito: SADF can’t just shoot their way to Luanda”, *The Weekly Mail*, 22 - 28 April 1988



Pretoria's aims in the conflict. Though heavily censored by excisions, the report clearly implied that the SADF objective was to seize Cuito Cuanavale. In summing up, SADF military operations, the report noted that the "South African belief that the town would fall though heavy artillery bombardment proved incorrect."<sup>385</sup>

However, key figures in the Botha regime were unambiguous in their repeated assertions that the SADF's objective was never to capture or occupy Cuito Cuanavale. Defense Minister Magnus Malan in his 17 May 1988 address to the South African parliament declared: "Cuito Cuanavale was never an objective, as some newspapers were widely speculating at the time...In this type of war; one does not take meaningless villages which are, furthermore, weakly situated from a tactical point of view."<sup>386</sup> This was also SADF Chief of Staff Geldenhuys' clearly articulated position. In his discussion of South African military operations in Angola from 1987-1988, he stated: "We did not attack Cuito Cuanavale."<sup>387</sup> He was much more emphatic in an interview: "I actually forbade the Chief of the Army (General Kurt Liebenburg) to take Cuito Cuanavale."<sup>388</sup> Geldenhuys goes on to add that the only time he would have countenanced the seizure of the town was if "Cuito Cuanavale fell into our lap and we could capture it without fighting for it, then our troops would occupy it."<sup>389</sup> Helmoed-Romer Heitman, also, asserted that the SADF objective was not to seize Cuito Cuanavale.<sup>390</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> USDIA *Briefing* (11 May 1988), 4

<sup>386</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard* 17 May 1988, 10013; Johannesburg "Special to The New York Times", *New York Times*, 18 May 1988

<sup>387</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 225

<sup>388</sup> Quoted in Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 369

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, 369

<sup>390</sup> Heitman, *War in Angola*, 296



However, members of the SADF who fought at Cuito Cuanavale contradict these statements, including one major figure from the ranks of the SADF general staff, the ground force field commanders and combat soldiers. Colonel Gerhard Louw, current commanding officer of the 3rd South African Infantry Battalion based in Kimberly, was quite clear that there was indeed a decision to take Cuito Cuanavale. At the time of the conflict, he commanded the 82<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, which was deployed in the Cuito Cuanavale area. Louw stated that one of the directives that he and other SADF ground force commanders received was to seize Cuito Cuanavale if the “option was available during the military operations that we were involved in carrying out.”<sup>391</sup> The military operations that he engaged in around the town were aimed at putting the SADF “in position to take Cuito Cuanavale.”<sup>392</sup>

This was also the understanding of ordinary SADF soldiers, the non-officers. From October 1987 to March 1988, Hein Groenewald drove an armoured vehicle (a ‘Ratel’) in a mechanized battalion in the Angolan conflict. He stated that the general thinking in his battalion was that the SADF was “going to take Cuito Cuanavale and everything we wanted to.”<sup>393</sup> Clive Holt, who also fought in Angola, echoed this in his memoirs: “The notion of crossing the bridge and taking the town of Cuito Cuanavale was being freely bantered about, and in one conversation we started discussing taking Cuito and just continuing in a northerly direction.”<sup>394</sup> Jose Kupussu, who served as a sergeant in the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, was even more emphatic about the South African objective: “We

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<sup>391</sup> Interview with Colonel Gerhard Louw

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>393</sup> Interview with Hein Groenewald (former SADF soldier), Pretoria, 2 August 2006

<sup>394</sup> C. Holt, *At Thy Call We Did Not Falter* (Cape Town, 2005), 105



were told by our commanders that the goal was to wipe FAPLA and the Cubans out of Cuito Cuanavale all the way to Menogue. To wipe them out and take all of Cuando Cubango province.”<sup>395</sup>

Compelling evidence that the SADF intended to capture Cuito Cuanavale emerges from the level of the SSC. Major-General Chris Thirion, who as deputy-director of Military Intelligence and member of the SSC’s secretariat, participated in the planning of the campaign. Thirion asserted that at SSC meetings, he argued against the scope of the intervention, particularly the drive to Cuito Cuanavale: “I thought we should not have been involved to the extent we became involved. I argued that we should focus on training UNITA forces.”<sup>396</sup> Thirion emphasized that while the capture of Cuito Cuanavale was not the initial aim when the SADF first intervened, it emerged as the goal because of the success the SADF enjoyed against FAPLA. Emboldened by the Angolan retreat, the SSC and the SADF general staff were caught up in the euphoria of victory. Pretoria decided that it could inflict a much more serious and decisive defeat on the MPLA government by seizing Cuito Cuanavale, the staging area of the failed FAPLA offensive. Therefore, *Operation Modular*’s objective expanded to encompass the capture of Cuito Cuanavale. Thirion stated the aim was no longer limited to saving UNITA: “When we started the objective was to stop the FAPLA assault. But because the campaign went so well, the objective became to take Cuito Cuanavale. Our conventional involvement and our ambitions grew and grew.”<sup>397</sup>

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<sup>395</sup> Interview with Jose Kupussu (former sergeant in the SADF 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion), Pomfret, 28 July 2006

<sup>396</sup> Interview with Major General Chris Thirion

<sup>397</sup> Interview with Major General Cchris Thirion



The minutes of the 29 February 1988 and 14 March 1988 SSC meetings provide support for Thirion's and the other SADF members' statements on SADF's intentions toward Cuito Cuanavale. At the 29 February 1988 SSC meeting, after General Geldenhuys supplied a detailed statistical account of the MPLA's material losses in the 14 February 1988 attack on FAPLA forces on the east bank of the Cuito River, the Council chairman (Botha) then "...inquired whether in the meantime UNITA might well conquer Cuito Cuanavale. General Geldenhuys stated that in his opinion this would be "merely [slegs - Afrikaans] a matter of time..."<sup>398</sup> The minutes of the 14 March 1988 meeting noted, "Minister P T C du Plessis inquired whether Cuito Cuanavale meanwhile could be captured by UNITA."<sup>399</sup> Geldenhuys responded, "within UNITA a conviction existed that the conquest of this village has a higher priority than securing the River Cuito as an obstacle."<sup>400</sup>

Prima facie, the 29 February and 14 March minutes seem to indicate that the only concern of the SSC is whether UNITA, not the SADF, can or will take Cuito Cuanavale. This is misleading. The impression left is that UNITA was in command and the principal military protagonist. However, regarding the 14 February attack, as explored in detail in Chapter Three, it was the SADF's elite 61st Mechanized Battalion with more than 100 vehicles that had led the 14 February assault. Indeed, it was the SADF that spearheaded all the attacks on FAPLA positions, with UNITA deployed in a supporting role. The South Africans were the only force equipped with the weapons (e.g., tanks, armoured

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<sup>398</sup> Department of Defence, Pretoria, SVR 4/88, 2, from MoD [Group 6], as itemized in CMIS/DOC C/R/514/2/7/3/1 in which the documents declassified from Operations Hooper, Modular & Packer are listed and dated. (A full identification list of these documents is given in the Bibliography). Translated from the Afrikaans original

<sup>399</sup> SVR 5/88, 2, from MoD [Group 6]

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*



personnel carriers) necessary to defeat and drive the FAPLA forces from the town. Curiously, the meeting has no reference to the 25 February attack led by the 61st Mechanized, which after initial success was forced to withdraw. Furthermore, the February 29th meeting takes place (see Chapter Three) the same day of another attack by the 61st Mechanized, equipped with 22 Olifant tanks organized in two tank squadrons. The 14 March meeting occurs nine days before the final attack led by the SADF's 82nd South African Brigade, yet no mention appears. In short, the SADF was in command and the main military actor.

In this light it seems quite strange and incongruous that the SSC minutes referred only to UNITA, as if it was the only party fighting FAPLA. This rendering in the minutes is explicable by Botha and Malan's determination to limit and restrict public access to information of SADF military operations in Angola. While Pretoria had already publicly acknowledged in November 1987 the SADF involvement in the Angolan conflict, it announced in December 1987 that the South African armed forces were leaving Angola. General Geldenhuys stated: "The process of withdrawing members of the Defence Force and the South West Africa Territory Force [*sic*] from Angola has begun."<sup>401</sup> Magnus Malan later that month asserted that SADF troops had withdrawn from Angola.<sup>402</sup> Nevertheless, to the contrary, the SADF was not withdrawing but reinforcing its troops. As Chapter Five explores, Pretoria heavily controlled and censored any news on the situation in Angola. Central to this control and censorship was Pretoria's insistence in late 1987 and early 1988 that no SADF forces were involved in the fighting in Angola.

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<sup>401</sup> "SADF pullout", *The Sowetan*, 7 December 1987

<sup>402</sup> "No link says Malan", *The Weekly Mail*, 11-17 December 1987



This control of information extended to the minutes of SSC meetings. While, the meetings were secret and confined to a tightly closed circle, the minutes circulated to a broader group. For example, the minutes of the 29 February 1988 meeting circulated to 39 persons, including: the President, Prime Minister, SADF-Chief, 16 Ministers, 2 Deputy-Ministers; 3 Directors-Generals and 4 Deputy-Director-Generals. The March 14th minutes were circulated to 33 persons. Thus, there always existed the possibility through happenstance that a copy could end up the hands of someone outside the desired circle. To preserve secrecy and ensure no information leaked-out, Thirion and De Kock stated that Botha and Malan carefully reviewed and sanitized the summaries of the discussions and decisions reported in the minutes.<sup>403</sup>

Any direct mention of SADF actions in Angola were redacted from the first draft. Instead code words and phrases would be deployed, whose meaning would be clear and unambiguous to the SSC members and designated recipients of SSC meeting minutes, but opaque and ambiguous to others. Frequently, UNITA was often the code word for the SADF, indicating what the South African armed forces had done or planned to do with or without UNITA participation. Reference to UNITA actions were often actual disguised references to the SADF dominated and controlled military operations. Of course, the challenge is determining when a reference to UNITA was actually a reference to the SADF. Given the extensive SADF presence in the Cuito Cuanavale area in February and March 1988, and its central role in the military operations, clearly the February 29th and March 14th UNITA references pertain to South African forces. Thus, Geldenhuys' February 29th reply that the fall of Cuito Cuanavale was "merely a matter of time" indicated the anticipated SADF conquest of the town. Also, any SADF setback

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<sup>403</sup> Interview with Major General Chris Thirion & Colonel Eugene de Kock, Correctional Services of Pretoria, Pretoria, 4 August 2006



could be disguised in the minutes as a UNITA failure. His March 14th response reaffirmed the strategic significance the SADF general staff attached to the capture of Cuito Cuanavale.

The evidence contradicts Pretoria's official denials that the objective of the SADF was to capture Cuito Cuanavale. There is almost unanimous consensus in the contemporary media reporting that the SADF's intention was the seizure and occupation of the town. What is most persuasive and conclusive are the testimonies from a member of the Botha regime's inner circle (Maj. Gen. Thirion), a commander (Colonel Louw) of troops deployed in the Cuito Cuanavale campaign. Colonel Louw's testimony is particularly compelling given the fact that as a ground-force commander the SADF general staff would have charged him with very specific orders and objectives. Gen. Thirion as an active participant in SSC and SADF general staff meetings was privy to the discussions and decisions at the highest levels of the Botha regime. This is further, buttressed by the SSC minutes, the testimony of SADF soldiers and the two United States Defence Intelligence Agency reports. Moreover, Malan's public statement about "the meaningless" and "weakly situated" Cuito Cuanavale is somewhat incredulous, given the strategic significance of the town, and the efforts and resources that the SADF expended in the battles around the town. The evidence seems to be quite persuasive that the SADF objective was to capture the town of Cuito Cuanavale.

### **THE BEGINNING OF THE CUITO CUANAVALÉ CAMPAIGN**

Once the decision was made to destroy the FAPLA formations and capture Cuito Cuanavale, the discussion among the SSC, the SADF general staff and ground force officers centred on what military strategy to pursue. On this, a clear division emerged between those whose sole focus was achieving a decisive military victory in the shortest time, and those who, while aiming for a decisive victory, were also worried about the



domestic political implications and ramifications of a costly assault on the town. On one side stood the SSC and SADF general staff, on the other, the ground commanders.

The disagreement centered on whether to attack Cuito Cuanavale from the east or west. The ground commanders Commandant Mike Muller, Commandant Henri Marais and Commandant Gerhard Louw advocated that the SADF forces should launch a large-scale outflanking attack from the west.<sup>404</sup> They argued that this was the most effective and quickest way to defeat the FAPLA brigades. First, it would cut the Angolans' lines of supply and reinforcement. Second, they argued that an attack from the west was more logical than an attack from the east. An attack from the east had had little chance of success because it would directly confront the strength of the FAPLA positions, which were heavily entrenched on east and west banks of the Cuito River. The ground commanders declared that because the "FAPLA defences in front of Cuito Cuanavale were virtually impregnable to an attack from the east,"<sup>405</sup> the best course of action was to swing around from the "rear" and avoid playing into FAPLA defensive strengths. Louw emphasized that the "military commanders wanted to try and take Cuito Cuanavale from the west instead of the east."<sup>406</sup> Commandant Robbie Hartsliet stated: "All the combat group commanders wanted to launch an attack from the west as early as November 1987."<sup>407</sup> This would have isolated Cuito Cuanavale. In Hartsliet's judgment, this would have ended the war as FAPLA would be forced to abandon the town. The ground commanders emphasized that the array of forces dictated an outflanking operation from

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<sup>404</sup> The rank of commandant was the equivalent of Lieutenant Colonel.

<sup>405</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 227

<sup>406</sup> Interview with Colonel Gerhard Louw

<sup>407</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 292



the west, encircling all the Angolan formations in Cuito Cuanavale and not just the ones on the east bank of the Cuito River; this would lead to their destruction “at the SADF’s leisure.”<sup>408</sup>

However, the SSC and the SADF high command rejected the proposal of a large-scale attack from the west. This rejection was based on three assessments. First, there was a desire to limit the number of SADF casualties and loss of equipment.<sup>409</sup> Geldenhuys’ previously noted admission that he preferred to capture Cuito Cuanavale “without fighting for it”<sup>410</sup> reflected this prevailing concern. Ground commander Louw stated that the “SADF did not want to lose people. It was not a popular war. Casualties would have been bad news.”<sup>411</sup> Second, given the logistical problems already outlined, the SADF did not have enough troops or materiel in Angola to launch a military operation of that magnitude.<sup>412</sup> Third, the high command considered FAPLA to be a beaten force, incapable of putting up effective resistance. Thus, any SADF operation should result in an Angolan rout. The high command reasoned that FAPLA could not have recovered from the series of serious defeats that it had endured. Botha, Malan and Geldenhuys concluded:

FAPLA was so demoralized that it would have little fight left in it. Just the threat of one last major push by the SADF with its formidable reputation enhanced by the Lomba triumphs, would be enough to make the Angolans cut and run.<sup>413</sup>

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<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*, 227

<sup>409</sup> *Ibid.*, 229

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid.*, 369

<sup>411</sup> Interview with Col Gerhard Louw. The extent of South African casualties is dealt with in Chapter Five.

<sup>412</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 230

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*, 23



Therefore, instead of taking Cuito Cuanavale in one swift blow, the general staff adopted a staged approach to the town's capture. In their estimation this would deliver a decisive and crippling blow to FAPLA with the least loss of South African life and expenditure of resources. What emerged was a combination of the proposal focusing on the destruction of the FAPLA forces on the river's east bank and the ground commanders' plan to destroy all the FAPLA brigades.<sup>414</sup> Accordingly, strategic goals would be accomplished one at a time, culminating in the eventual seizure of Cuito Cuanavale. Consequently, the first new offensive that SADF high command opted for was a less ambitious operation than proposed by the ground commanders. It occurred on a smaller front and with a more limited objective. Its aim was two-fold: to drive the FAPLA brigades from their eastern positions on the Cuito and Cuanavale rivers and to destroy the Chambinga bridge. This was the prelude to a direct assault on the town.

The operation to dislodge the FAPLA brigades was launched on 25 November. Under the command of Mike Muller, the 4th South African Infantry and the 61st Mechanized battalion, together with UNITA forces, focused their attack on FAPLA's 25th Brigade, which has assumed a defensive position at the Chambinga Bridge. However, the South Africans failed to achieve any of these objectives. FAPLA reinforced their positions with an additional tank battalion. This together with intense shelling of advancing SADF and UNITA troops by Angolan artillery located in Cuito Cuanavale proved sufficient to repel the South African attack.

At this point the SADF general staff decided to call an end to *Operation Modular*. Despite the failure to destroy the FAPLA brigades, Pretoria and the South African generals deemed *Operation Modular* a success. This evaluation was based on

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<sup>414</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 297



two considerations. First, the SADF “had stopped and inflicted savage losses”<sup>415</sup> on the Angolan armed forces and forced them to fall back to Cuito Cuanavale.<sup>416</sup> Second, the general staff believed that *Operation Modular* had laid the foundations for the destruction of the FAPLA formations and the seizure of Cuito Cuanavale.<sup>417</sup> With the end of *Operation Modular*, preparations were made for the initiation of *Operation Hooper*, which would complete the elimination of the FAPLA brigades on the east bank of the Cuito River, leading to the capture of the town.

Colonel Breytenbach disagreed with this optimistic appraisal. In his estimation, it was a “delusion” to believe and then act as if it were still possible to fulfill the strategic goals as outlined by Pretoria and the SADF general staff.<sup>418</sup> In his judgment, “[n]o hope remained of destroying the FAPLA east of Cuito Cuanavale.”<sup>419</sup> Breytenbach based his evaluation on a factor that transformed the balance of forces in the conflict, *viz.*, the ongoing reinforcement of the FAPLA brigades by Cuban armed forces, and the Cubans’ assumption of overall command of Angolan forces at Cuito Cuanavale. The underestimation by the SADF of FAPLA and the impact of Cuban reinforcements combined with overestimation of its own forces was to have profound consequences for the future conduct of the conflict.

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<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*, 237

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid.* 298.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*, 298

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*, 298



## THE CUBAN INTERVENTION

The escape and survival of the brigades did not relieve the situation for FAPLA. Given their losses, their forced retreat and pursuit by the South Africans, the leadership of the MPLA viewed the developing situation in and around Cuito Cuanavale as extremely dangerous. The loss of the town would have constituted a potentially mortal blow to FAPLA, and, therefore, a serious blow to the MPLA regime. Cuito Cuanavale's strategic significance lay in its function as a FAPLA staging area and as an airbase to patrol southern Angola. Angolan General Antonio dos Santos outlined Luanda's evaluation: "We thought that if they [the South Africans] won at Cuito Cuanavale, the road would be open to the north of Angola. Strategically, it was an important place to defend."<sup>420</sup>

Several western specialists on South Africa characterized the confrontation as a critical moment for Angola, arguing, for example, that an SADF capture of the town would have constituted a "knock-out blow against the MPLA"<sup>421</sup> and "a decisive victory which would change the course of the war."<sup>422</sup> Contemporary western and South African newspapers echoed this assessment. *The [South African] Weekly Mail* described Cuito Cuanavale as part of a strategically important "line of steel" across southern Angola "from Lubango in the West to Menogue."<sup>423</sup> Havana concurred in this assessment. The Cuban military command, in constant contact with its Angolan counterpart, was well aware of the *débâcle* and significant losses that had been inflicted on FAPLA. Cuban

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<sup>420</sup> *Cuba! Africa! Revolution!*

<sup>421</sup> Herbstein & Evenson, *The Devils Are Among Us*, 171

<sup>422</sup> Brittain, *Death of Dignity*, 35

<sup>423</sup> P. Laurence, "Angola: Has Fapla lost the war? Or just a battle?", *The Weekly Mail*, 6 – 12 November 1987



General Jesus M. Bermudez Cutino noted the “gravity of the military situation” confronting FAPLA.<sup>424</sup>

In response to the rapidly deteriorating situation, the dos Santos government requested Cuban assistance.<sup>425</sup> Castro described the request received from Luanda as “desperate calls.”<sup>426</sup> In Havana’s assessment, after the success of their intervention, the SADF, now “emboldened, was advancing in depth towards Cuito Cuanavale.”<sup>427</sup> The Cuban leadership believed the SADF was poised to destroy the FAPLA formations that had now assumed new defensive positions in Cuito Cuanavale. In their view, the fall of Cuito Cuanavale would have rendered the Angolan armed forces’ position untenable. At a 15 November meeting of the Politburo of the Communist Party of Cuba, Fidel Castro stated “the South African intervention had led to an extremely serious situation and there was the danger of the destruction or annihilation of the largest and best formations of Angolan troops.”<sup>428</sup>

Havana also cast the unfolding struggle to hold onto the town as a serious existential threat to the Angolan nation: Angola’s future lay in the balance. Castro repeatedly stated the Cuban government’s belief that Angola’s “national stability was

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<sup>424</sup> General J. M. Bermudez Cutino, La escalada militar sudafricana en Angola, in in *La guerra de Angola*, 137

<sup>425</sup> See for example USDIA *Lessons Learned* (1988), 12 [declassified]. See also George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, p 210

<sup>426</sup> Castro, *My Life*, 327. See also: Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 229 & 341; Colonel H. V. Tamayo, Cuito Cuanavale: defensa y la victoria, in *La guerra de Angola* (La Habana, 1989), 147

<sup>427</sup> Castro, *My Life*, 327

<sup>428</sup> Misión Cubana, 35; See also *Case 1/1989*, 381



threatened.”<sup>429</sup> In Havana’s estimation, a South African victory would have meant not only capture of the town and destruction of the best Angolan military formations, but quite probably also the end of Angola’s existence as an independent country. Brigadier General Ernio Hernandez Rodriquez, who was later appointed commander of Cuban troops in Cuito Cuanavale, stated that Havana could not allow Cuito Cuanavale “to fall into the hands of the South Africans because of its strategic importance and political symbolism.”<sup>430</sup> In short, the SADF capture of Cuito Cuanavale would be “a mortal blow against Angola.”<sup>431</sup>

Moreover, if the SADF succeeded in crushing the Angolan forces at Cuito Cuanavale, the Cuban forces then in Angola would be placed in a precarious strategic situation. They stood on a line 800km from the border with Namibia, stretching from the port of Namibe to Menogue. The Angolan loss of Cuito Cuanavale would render Cuban troops vulnerable to SADF attacks. Moreover, a crippling Angolan defeat would have meant that the Cuban intervention, which had lasted more than a decade, expended considerable resources and resulted in Cuban deaths, would have been a costly failure. Havana also shared the SADF general staff’s conclusion that FAPLA brigades’ morale “had been destroyed”<sup>432</sup> and would be unable to withstand a concerted South African attack. Consequently, the Cuban government viewed prevention of South African capture of Cuito Cuanavale as imperative, deciding that without a significant Cuban intervention the Angolans would be dealt a severe defeat. Havana felt “obliged one more

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<sup>429</sup> Castro, *Protagonistas de la Victoria*, 11

<sup>430</sup> Interview with Brigadier General E. H. Rodriguez, in Luis Baez, *Secretos de los Generales: Declasificado* (La Habana, 1996), 393

<sup>431</sup> Castro, *My Life*, 327

<sup>432</sup> Castro, *My Life*, 328



time [as in 1975] to come to the defense of Angola”<sup>433</sup> and decided to reinforce its forces in Angola by expanding the number of Cuban ground troops, pilots and aircraft.<sup>434</sup> Jorge Risquet, a member of Cuba’s leadership and present at the 15 November Politburo meeting, recounted Havana’s decision to intervene:

On November 15<sup>th</sup>, the high command got together, with Fidel presiding and decided to resolve the problem once and for all: to kick the South Africans out of Angola. But doing this was impossible with the 10- or 20-thousand troops we had there. It required anti-aircraft batteries, aircraft, armoured units and artillery from Cuba. We sent our best anti-aircraft batteries, which we took from our own positions here in Cuba...We had to sort out the situation<sup>435</sup>

Havana took this decision without consulting Moscow. The Cuban government waited eight days before informing the Soviets through General Ulises Rosales del Toro. Rosales del Toro arrived in Moscow on November 23, the same day the first Cuban detachments departed for Angola. Jorge Risquet stated the Castro government had planned that when Rosales arrived, the Cuban decision would be “already an accomplished fact.”<sup>436</sup> On December 1, 1987, during a visit to Moscow, Fidel Castro replied to Soviet criticisms of Cuban actions. Castro told Mikhail Gorbachev that Cuba accepted no fault for the error that led to the crisis but could not avoid taking action:

We have not the slightest responsibility for the military situation created there [Angola]...The responsibility falls solely on the Soviet advisors...The situation of the country [Angola] has continued to worsen. The facts demonstrate that our decision to send reinforcements

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<sup>433</sup> Misión Cubana, 35

<sup>434</sup> *Case 1/ 1989: End of the Cuban Connection* (Havana, 1989), 381

<sup>435</sup> *Cuba! Africa! Revolution!*; See also Tamayo, Cuito Cuanavale, 7

<sup>436</sup> Quoted in P. Gleijeses, *La causa mas bonita: Cuba y Africa, 1975-1988*, in P. Gleijeses and J. Risquet y Fernando Remirez (eds.), *Cuba y Africa: Historia Comun de Lucha y Sangre* (La Habana, 2007), 58



immediately was absolutely correct...Cuba will do all that it can to help out of this difficult situation.<sup>437</sup>

On 23 November, Cuban troops left the island for Angola by air and by sea. Among the detachments was the elite 50th Brigade stationed around Havana. The first detachments arrived in Cuito Cuanavale on 5 December. Under *Operación Maniobra 31* (*Operation Manoeuvre 31*), more than 18,000 personnel in 140 flights were transported to Angola from Cuba.<sup>438</sup> By May 1988, according to several statements by Fidel Castro, the number of Cuban armed forces personnel in Angola had risen to an estimated 55,000.<sup>439</sup> Division General Ulises Rosales del Toro confirmed that the troop strength reached more than 50,000.<sup>440</sup> These figures are consistent with General Orlando Almaguel Vidal's statement that at the end of the conflict he supervised the return to Cuba of 52,000 military personnel.<sup>441</sup>

The arrival of Cuban reinforcements did not pass unnoticed by the United States. Washington was aware that Havana had decided to embark on a significant military buildup. The extensive U.S. satellite surveillance system detected not only a qualitative shift in the Cuban military presence, but was also able to estimate the actual numbers by examining the number of recreational facilities that were constructed. Chester Crocker

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<sup>437</sup> Fidel Castro a Gorbachev, 1<sup>o</sup> de diciembre de 1987, CIFAR, quoted in P. Gleijeses, *La causa mas bonita*, 59-60

<sup>438</sup> Interview with Brigadier General Orlando Almaguel Vidal, *Secretos de los Generales: Declasificado* (La Habana, 1996), 212

<sup>439</sup> See Castro, *My Life*, 329; Castro, *Protagonistas de la Victoria*, 11; and *Case 1/1989*, 380.

<sup>440</sup> Interview with Division General Ulises Rosales del Toro, *Secretos de los Generales: Declasificado*, 500

<sup>441</sup> Interview with Brigadier General Orlando Almaguel Vidal, 212



noted: “The Cubans made the decision to double the forces they had in Angola. Basically, if you wanted to find out how many Cubans there are, you started counting baseball diamonds from satellites.”<sup>442</sup>

A recurrent theme in contemporary reporting by western newspapers was the dramatic increase in the number of Cuban troops. It was always a story element, even when an article’s focus was not specifically on the Cuban military contribution. An article in *The Times* mentioned Cuban troops and materiel “streaming into the besieged town” of Cuito Cuanavale.<sup>443</sup> The size of the Cuban contingent in Angola was frequently an item of speculation, with estimates usually ranging from 30, 000 to 50,000.<sup>444</sup> The 50,000-estimation is quite close to the actual number that Havana has consistently stated was deployed.<sup>445</sup> Also, articles written at the time of the battles for Cuito Cuanavale often portrayed the Cubans as a new and possibly decisive factor in the

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<sup>442</sup> *Cuba! Africa! Revolution!*

<sup>443</sup> P. Godwin, “Secret talks on Angolan war: Military impasse leads to unlikely thaw between South Africa and the Soviet Union”, *The Times*, 13 March 1988

<sup>444</sup> See, for example: P. Fletcher, “Angola Determined To Stop South Africans From taking Key Town”, *Reuters*, 23 January 1988; M. Hornsby, “Key battle rages as Crocker talks to Angolans”, *The Times*, 28 January 1988; “Besieged Angolan Town: Reuters”, *Chicago Tribune*, 28 January 1988; C. Nickerson, “Turning Point In A Civil War? Angolans, Rebels Fight What May Be Pivotal Battle,” *Boston Globe*, 26 April 1988; P. Brimelow, “A blind eye to Castro; Cuban involvement in Angola; Commentary”, *The Times*, 9 July 1988; D. B. Ottaway, “State Dept. Increases Estimate Of Cuban Troops in Angola”, *Washington Post*, 3 September 1988; “3 Nations Achieve Accord On Namibia”, *New York Times*, 16 November 1988.

<sup>445</sup> See, for example: Castro, *My Life*, 329 and Castro, *Protagonistas de la Victoria*, 12.



conflict.<sup>446</sup> Cuban air power was particularly singled out in several newspaper accounts.<sup>447</sup>

A significant transfer of supplies and equipment accompanied Cuban troop reinforcement. During *Operación Maniobra* more than 57,000 tonnes of medical supplies and equipment and a squadron of MiG-23s were transferred. The armament build-up included hundreds of tanks. Some Cuban sources indicate that the tank force assembled rose to more than 600.<sup>448</sup> General Ulises Rosales del Toro stated that the actual total Cuban tank strength reached more than 1,200.<sup>449</sup> Along with the arrival of new tanks, the ground forces were further strengthened by a Cuban artillery battalion<sup>450</sup> and an estimated 1,000 anti-aircraft weapons.<sup>451</sup> Cuban air power increased to 150 fighter aircraft and helicopters.<sup>452</sup>

The Cuban intervention encompassed more than the deployment of better-equipped troops: Havana sent one their most trusted generals, Leopoldo Cintra Frias to

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<sup>446</sup> J. Brooke, "Cubans on patrol in South Angola", *New York Times*, 16 December 1987; and P. Godwin, "Secret talks on Angolan war: Military impasse leads to unlikely thaw between South Africa and the Soviet Union", *The Times*, 13 March 1988.

<sup>447</sup> See, for example: "Cuban warplanes in Angola attack South African forces: Associated Press", *Syracuse Herald*, 21 January 1988; "Kaunda praises Cuban air raids on South Africans in Angola", *BBC Monitoring Service: Africa*, 25 January 1988; R. Kennedy, "Angolans besieged", *The Times*, 21 January 1988; P. Fletcher, "Angola Determined To Stop South Africans From taking Key Town", *Reuters*, 23 January 1988; "Besieged Angolan Town Rescued: Reuters", *Chicago Tribune*, 28 January 1988; and P. Fletcher, "Buoyant Young Cuban Troops Hold Lines Of Defence In Angola", *Reuters*, 3 March 1988

<sup>448</sup> See for example, Castro, *My Life*, 329; J. G. Blight, *et al.* (1993), 245.

<sup>449</sup> Interview with Division General Ulises Rosales del Toro, Baez (1996), 500

<sup>450</sup> Misión Cubana, 37 [author's translation]

<sup>451</sup> Castro, *My Life*, 329

<sup>452</sup> Interview with Division General Ulises Rosales del Toro, *ibid.*



Angola.<sup>453</sup> Cintra Frias had served in Angola in previous missions. He would not only provide experience but also be able to increase the Cuban influence on the military decisions made. Castro on several occasions declared that Cuba had “put everything at stake in that action”<sup>454</sup> and that a military *débâcle* “would have meant a major defeat for the [Cuban] Revolution.”<sup>455</sup> Carlos Fernandez de Cossio, an official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs concurred: “A defeat at Cuito Cuanavale would have had a devastating psychological and moral impact on the Cuban people.”<sup>456</sup> Cuba would have had to grapple not only with defeat, but the realization that loss of life and allocation of considerable resources over more than a decade was a failure.

Due to the perceived stakes, the situation in Angola was the major preoccupation of the Cuban leadership. Fidel Castro devoted most of his time from November 1987 to June 1988 to the military situation in Angola. A coded radio communications system established a direct link between Havana and Cintra Frias’ and FAPLA’s headquarters in Luanda, enabling the rapid transmission of detailed information and instructions.<sup>457</sup> Division General Samuel Rodiles Planas, who served as head of the Cuban delegation to Angola in 1987, stated that Fidel Castro frequently contacted the command centre: “We spoke twice a day, once in the evening and the other time in the night. In one

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<sup>453</sup> *Case 1/1989*, 382 & 385; and *Misión Cubana*, 37 [author’s translation]

<sup>454</sup> F. Castro, *We will never return to the slave barracks*, 31-68 in N. Mandela & F. Castro, *How Far We Slaves Have Come!* (New York, 1991), 35

<sup>455</sup> *Case 1/1989*, 394

<sup>456</sup> Interview with Carlos Fernandez de Cossio, official of Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Havana, 2 May 2007

<sup>457</sup> *Case 1/1989*, 382



conversation he asked me more than twenty questions, including, asking if it had rained in Cuito Cuanavale.”<sup>458</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Unable and unwilling to countenance the defeat of UNITA, Pretoria had intervened in Angola. In essence, it was the most dramatic manifestation of the drive for regional hegemony as encompassed in the “total strategy” doctrine, the ideology of the militarized apartheid state. The fact that Angola was designated as the strategic arena of struggle outside of South Africa rendered the invasion a logical and almost ineluctable outcome.

With the defeat of the July offensive and the forced headlong retreat of the FAPLA brigades, Pretoria committed itself to inflicting a devastating blow to the MPLA government. Towards this end it devoted significant resources and personnel. In response, to growing crisis, Havana decided that the moment for a decisive trial of military strength and strategy had presented itself. This trial, the battle for Cuito Cuanavale, is the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>458</sup> Interview with Division General Samuel Rodiles Planas, in Luis Baez *Secretos de los Generales*, 287-288



### CHAPTER THREE: THE BATTLE FOR CUITO CUANAVALÉ

The 1987-88 conflict unfolded in several phases. The first began in July 1987 with the FAPLA offensive against UNITA. The second unfolded in September with the South African intervention after FAPLA crossed the Lomba River. With Savimbi's forces pushed to the brink of defeat, the SADF invaded and inflicted heavy casualties and material damage. They eventually forced the Angolan forces into a full retreat to Cuito Cuanavale. The war aim of Pretoria had changed from simply preventing the destruction of UNITA to inflicting a devastating defeat on the Angolan armed forces. This chapter deals with the third phase, which began in December 1987 and ended in March 1988. During this period, the SADF made several concerted attempts to destroy the Angolan military formations in Cuito Cuanavale and seize the town. This phase encompasses the arrival of significant Cuban reinforcements, which would alter the course of the conflict. It ends with the last attempt on 23 March 1988 by the SADF to capture Cuito Cuanavale.

The series of battles at Cuito Cuanavale defined the 1987-88 conflagration. The resources expended attest to the overriding importance attached to the struggle by Pretoria, on one side, and Luanda and Havana, on the other. At the beginning of 1988, the western media increased their coverage of the South African offensive, running several articles on the extent of the invasion and the SADF advance through southern Angola in late 1987. On 7 January 1988, Associated Press reported on the SADF destruction of several strategic targets and "the drive to capture key towns."<sup>459</sup> *Reuters* reported the diplomatic assessment that the fall of Cuito Cuanavale "would be a major

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<sup>459</sup> "S. African troops drive in Angola: AP", *The Montgomery County Intelligence Record*, 7 January 1988. See also; "South Africans reported out to seize Angolan base", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 24 March 1988; "Angola says troops quell S. African attack in south", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 28 March 1988



defeat for the Angolan government.”<sup>460</sup> A *Reuters*’ Angolan source declared: “We cannot lose this area...It is a question of survival.”<sup>461</sup> As the battle progressed, The *New York Times* cast it as a strategic confrontation that would have profound consequences for Angola and “repercussions throughout southern Africa.”<sup>462</sup> *The Economist* identified Cuito Cuanavale as “a key point.”<sup>463</sup> A special report to *The Times* described Cuito Cuanavale as “the strategic town.”<sup>464</sup>

This chapter reconstructs the series of engagements that occurred from November 1987 to March 1988, focusing on the military dimensions and outcome of the battle for Cuito Cuanavale. Reconstructing the battle is essential in evaluating the competing interpretations of the outcome of the battle; interpretations often reduced to an assertion of who won and who lost. The central questions engaged are: What were the respective strategies employed? What was the impact of the Cuban intervention? In engaging these and other issues, the chapter draws on the accounts, documents, interviews and other sources mentioned and discussed in the previous chapter (Chapter Two). Both chapters taken together constitute a detailed treatment of the lead-up to and the actual clashes that constitute the battle of Cuito Cuanavale. Also, the account in these chapters draw extensively on sources from both sides of the conflict. As noted in the last chapter, what stands out is the remarkable agreement between the first-hand accounts of the warring

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<sup>460</sup> D. Rogers, “Rebel Capture of Besieged Town Would Be Serious Blow To Angola, *Reuters*”, 26 January 1988

<sup>461</sup> “Besieged Angola Town Rescued”, *Reuters*, 28 January 1988

<sup>462</sup> J. F. Burns, “Hints That Repression May Lead to Reform”, *New York Times*, 7 February 1988

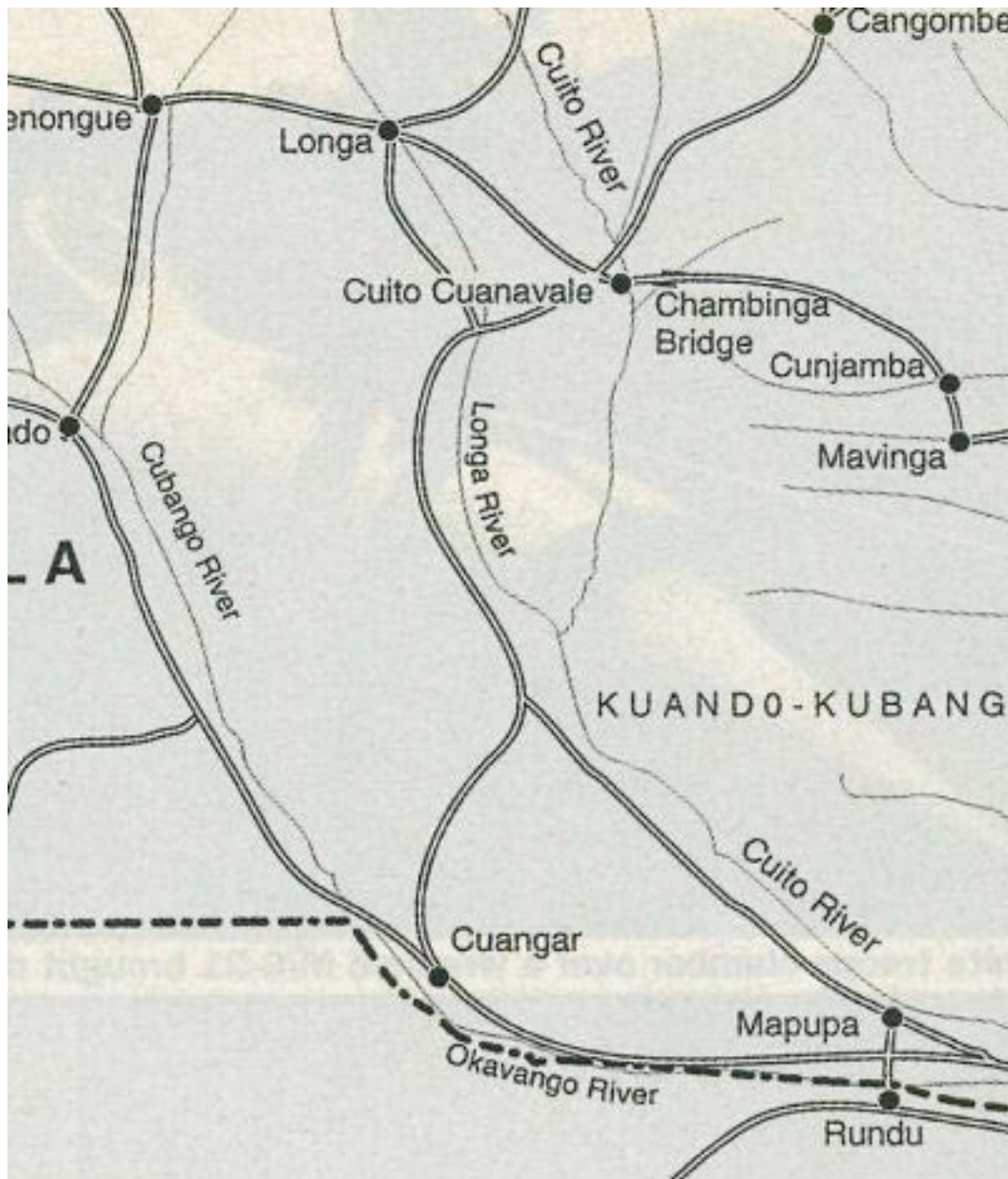
<sup>463</sup> “Angola’s deadly stalemate”, *The Economist*, 27 February 1988

<sup>464</sup> J. Raath, “The War in Angola: Luanda forces braced for South African onslaught”, *The Times*, 1 March 1988; “Pretoria admits tanks in Angola”, *The Times*, 5 April 1988 and J. D. Battersby, “Pretoria Aircraft In Angola”, *New York Times*, 23 February 1988



parties. While the South Africans and Cubans tend to emphasize different events and aspects of the struggle, the unexpected shared consensus permits the construction of a coherent narrative of what unfolded.

**Map 3: Cuito Cuanavale.**<sup>465</sup>



<sup>465</sup> Source: [www.acig.info/CMS/?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=132&Itemid=47](http://www.acig.info/CMS/?option=com_content&task=view&id=132&Itemid=47)



## THE FIRST CLASH

With FAPLA forces driven back to Cuito Cuanavale, the conflict entered a new strategic phase: the SADF siege of and effort to capture the town. However, Cuito Cuanavale's size belied the importance attached to it. As FAPLA General Antonio dos Santos underscored:

But it was only a village," people talk about Cuito Cuanavale. But it was only a village! So when we brought troops from the centre or north to Cuito Cuanavale, they would get off the plane, go to the barracks, and then ask: "Chief, when are we going to Cuito?" "You are there!" "What I came here to defend this?"<sup>466</sup>

The successful FAPLA retreat to the town did not reduce the human toll: the casualties continued to mount as South Africa bombed and shelled the FAPLA positions in and around Cuito Cuanavale. The SADF repeatedly bombed and UNITA forces extensively mined the supply routes from Menogue to Cuito Cuanavale. UNITA committed itself to disrupting any FAPLA and Cuban transportation. Igor Zhdarkin, a Soviet military advisor at Cuito Cuanavale, stated, "the road from Cuito Cuanavale to Menogue was controlled by UNITA."<sup>467</sup> As the troops in Cuito Cuanavale could only be supplied from Menogue, this transformed any supply column into a perilous mission. The 250km journey from Menogue to Cuito Cuanavale became known among Angolan soldiers as "the road of death."<sup>468</sup> Cuban First Lieutenant Pedro Campos Perales, who served as an artillery officer, stated that everyone had to be constantly on their guard as mines could be planted anywhere: "The enemy put mines in the most incredible places: in the

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<sup>466</sup> *Cuba! Africa! Revolution!*

<sup>467</sup> Quoted in Shubin, *The USSR and Southern Africa*, 13

<sup>468</sup> Interview with General Jorge Dumba



trees...in the potholes of the highway and even, under the asphalt. They would appear in the most unsuspected places.”<sup>469</sup>

Cuban Lieutenant Colonel Ruben Jimenez Gomez, who served in the south of Angola from 1987-89, wrote that the work of medics had “no end” due to the numerous deaths and injuries caused by the mines and UNITA attacks.<sup>470</sup> He noted: “The mines were the greatest threat to our troops, causing many fatalities and many mutilations, mostly the loss of arms and legs...creating a state of psychological insecurity.”<sup>471</sup> The fear and fatalism that pervaded FAPLA, was reflected by an Angolan soldier, who said: “Imagine every 50 metres there was a mine. I would leave Menogue and I would not know if I would reach Cuito Cuanavale alive, if I would die on the way.”<sup>472</sup> Death was the fate of many. General Jorge Dumba, who was in command of FAPLA troops at Cuito Cuanavale noted: “During the day 100-200 deaths would occur. This was normal because of South African bombing and UNITA attacks.”<sup>473</sup> Given that the siege lasted into April 1988, this indicates a considerable loss of life.

On 13 November the SADF had begun shelling Cuito Cuanavale with their G5 and G6 long-range cannons.<sup>474</sup> The G5 and G6 were 155-mm artillery guns with a range of 25 miles (40 kilometers). In preparations for their assault on the town, the SADF intensified the artillery barrage. Malan stated that the goal was to destroy the new

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<sup>469</sup> P. E. Campos Perales, *Victoria Al Sur De Angola* (La Habana, 2006), 82

<sup>470</sup> R. J. Gomez, *En El Sur de Angola* (La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubana, 2009), 74

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*, 74

<sup>472</sup> Interview with Angolan soldier, *The Road of Death* (Johannesburg: Ex-Combatants Association, 2004)

<sup>473</sup> Interview with General Jorge Dumba

<sup>474</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 215. See also; V. Tamayo, Cuito Cuanavale, 147



defensive formations: “We started hitting it [Cuito Cuanavale]. We knew where the operation headquarters were. We knew where the anti-aircraft and the artillery were. And we opened fire.”<sup>475</sup> From December to April 1988 the SADF subjected the town to an almost continual artillery bombardment. Raul Castro, then Cuba’s Minister of Defence, stated that during this period an estimated 20,000 150-mm shells fell on Cuito Cuanavale: a daily average of more than 130.<sup>476</sup> Colonel Villgas Tamayo concurred stating that more than 100 artillery shells fell on Cuito Cuanavale each day during this period.<sup>477</sup> The barrage was so incessant that during lulls, Angolan soldiers remarked: “What is wrong with the enemy? They are not attacking us today.”<sup>478</sup> Luis Moreno Hildago, a Cuban who served in a tank brigade in Cuito Cuanavale from March to May 1988, described the terror and uncertainty that gripped the soldiers who faced the continual shelling: “Many times we were terrified. We were like cats, just holding on to our lives.”<sup>479</sup> In November and December 1987, bombing raids by the SAAF accompanied the artillery barrages. These air attacks were so indiscriminate that FAPLA General Dumba observed: “There was a small island in the Cuito River where villagers sought refuge. The South Africans even bombed that island. They were attacking and killing everything.”<sup>480</sup>

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<sup>475</sup> *Cuba! Africa! Revolution!*

<sup>476</sup> Gomez, *En El Sur*, 236

<sup>477</sup> Tamayo, Cuito Cuanavale, 149

<sup>478</sup> Interview with Angolan soldier, in *The Road of Death* (Johannesburg: Ex-Combatants Association, 2004)

<sup>479</sup> Interview with Luis Moreno Hildago, Havana, 28 April 2006

<sup>480</sup> Interview with General Jorge Dumba



During December 1987 and the first two weeks of January 1988, FAPLA strengthened their positions on the east bank of the Cuito River by positioning three brigades - the 21st and 25th infantry and 59th mechanized - as a block to any South African advance from the east. They were deployed in an arc of 18 to 20 km.<sup>481</sup> The objective was to prevent the SADF and their UNITA allies from seizing the east bank and then crossing the Cuito River. A South African crossing of the River would probably have rendered the FAPLA positions in Cuito Cuanavale untenable. The Cuito River represented a natural defense barrier. For General Dumba “the Cuito River was strategic to the defence of Angola.”<sup>482</sup> The 21st, 25th and 59th brigades were spread quite widely across the eastern bank, with approximately five kilometers separating each one.<sup>483</sup> To the rear of the 21st, 25th and 59th brigades, the 16th and 66th brigades took up positions in the Tumpo Triangle, a 10-square kilometer area, bounded by the smaller Tumpo and Dala rivers, tributaries of the Cuito and Cuanavale rivers, respectively. Most of this area consisted of a large depressed flood plain.

As the FAPLA brigades redeployed in and around Cuito Cuanavale, there continued to be significant disagreements between the Cuban and Soviet officers on what military course to pursue. This was underscored during the interregnum when South Africa had ended *Operation Modular* and was preparing to launch *Operation Hooper*. For example, on 20 December 1987, Havana sent a message stating that they “were annoyed by the unexpected ideas which are inexplicable and run counter to our views about the struggle in the south against South Africa, which is the main way to solve the

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<sup>481</sup> Blanch, *Cuba: pequeño gigante*, 69

<sup>482</sup> Interview with General Jorge Dumba

<sup>483</sup> *Case 1/1989*, 384



problems created in Angola.”<sup>484</sup> The disagreements centred on how and where the FAPLA forces should be deployed, particularly the 58th and 10th FAPLA brigades based in Menongue. The Soviets wanted to dispatch these brigades to Cuanza in central Angola. The Cubans objected on the basis that it did not seem logical to redeploy the 58th and the 10th while the fight for Cuito Cuanavale was still ongoing and before there was any indication of what plan the SADF would pursue. If the South Africans renewed their attack on the FAPLA positions in and around the town, the 58th and 10th brigades would be too far away to render rapid support. In a 12 January [1988] dispatch, the Cuban High Command was adamant on this point: “Until South African intentions were made clear, the 58th and 10th shouldn’t be moved.”<sup>485</sup> Unfolding events justified this stance. On 13 January the SADF launched the first major offensive of *Operation Hooper*.<sup>486</sup>

*Operation Hooper* began with an intense bombardment of the bridge across the Cuito River. In preparation for their first assault on the Angolan positions around Cuito Cuanavale, the SAAF carried out an intense bombardment of the Cuito bridge. Missiles and pilot-less drones were used in the attack.<sup>487</sup> The SADF general staff considered the bridge to be a significant point of Angolan logistical vulnerability.<sup>488</sup> The bridge’s destruction would have left the brigades stranded with no possibility of retreat or re-supply, thus dividing the Angolan forces between those stranded on the river’s east bank

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<sup>484</sup> *Case 1/1989*, 383

<sup>485</sup> *Ibid.*, 384

<sup>486</sup> See Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 301 and *Case 1/1989*, 384

<sup>487</sup> Tamayo, Cuito Cuanavale, 149

<sup>488</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 300



and those stationed on the west bank and in Cuito Cuanavale.<sup>489</sup> While, the Cuito bridge was viewed by the South Africans as the most strategic river crossing, they targeted all the bridges for destruction. General Dumba observed: “All the bridges were destroyed by the South African army.”<sup>490</sup> However, while the SAAF destroyed the Cuito bridge, the Angolans were able to rebuild it, which allowed the brigades to be reinforced by Angolan troops already based in Cuito Cuanavale.

The attacks on the Cuito Bridge were followed by the SADF’s 13 January offensive, which occurred in the early hours of the morning. An intensive air strike and artillery barrage preceded a ground assault spearheaded by the 61st Mechanized and the 4th South African Infantry.<sup>491</sup> FAPLA’s 21<sup>st</sup> Brigade bore the brunt of the South African attack.<sup>492</sup> The battle lasted around three hours. In the end, the 21st Brigade could not withstand the SADF pressure and abandoned its position. The Cubans described the withdrawal as a “disorganized retreat.”<sup>493</sup> Colonel Breytenbach was more categorical, stating that the 21st “cracked and ran.”<sup>494</sup> Eventually, on 14 January, the brigade withdrew into the Tumpo Triangle. UNITA troops occupied the 21st’s trenches and bunkers.<sup>495</sup> As the 21st brigade had been deployed between the 25th and 59th brigades,

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<sup>489</sup> Tamayo, Cuito Cuanavale, 149

<sup>490</sup> Interview with General J. Dumba, Commander of Cuito Cuanavale, *The Strategic Bridge that Refused to Surrender* (Pretoria, 2004)

<sup>491</sup> See Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 301 and *Case 1/1989*, 384; V. Tamayo, Cuito Cuanavale, 150

<sup>492</sup> Interview with Brigadier General Ernio Hernandez Rodriquez, Baez, 393

<sup>493</sup> Misión Cubana, 37

<sup>494</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 301

<sup>495</sup> Interview with Brigadier General Ernio Hernandez Rodriquez, 393



its flight left a gap in the middle of the defensive line. The breach extended to five km.<sup>496</sup> The opening presented the SADF and UNITA with the opportunity to penetrate and surround the 25th and 59th brigades.<sup>497</sup> The dislodging of the 21st, therefore, endangered the defensive perimeter that had been established. Moreover, Cuban reinforcements were more than 200 km away in Menogue.<sup>498</sup>

The next day, 14 January, the SADF continued its artillery barrage, and at approximately noon, four columns, comprising around 30 tanks and 60 armoured personnel carriers attacked through the gap between the 25th and 59th brigades. The South Africans managed to penetrate the Angolan positions and then swing around and attack the 59th from both the flank and rear. However, despite being attacked from two sides, the 59th launched a counter-attack. FAPLA artillery also opened fire on the South Africans. Angolan tanks and artillery were now crucially augmented by Cuban air power. In January two new squadrons of Cuban MiG 23s and MiG 21s arrived at Menogue.<sup>499</sup> Cuban pilots had begun flying missions from Menogue against the SADF.<sup>500</sup> On 13 January alone, Cuban pilots flew 22 sorties, heavily bombarding South African positions, dropping 32 tons of bombs.<sup>501</sup> This air assault continued throughout 14-16 January. The Cuban air attacks were seen as pivotal in halting the South African assault on the FAPLA positions. Several newspapers, for example, reported Angolan

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<sup>496</sup> F. Castro, *Vindicacion de Cuba* (La Habana, 1989), 399

<sup>497</sup> Interview with Brigadier General Ernio Hernandez Rodriquez, 393

<sup>498</sup> Castro, *Vindicacion de Cuba*, 399

<sup>499</sup> Gomez, *En El Sur*, 129

<sup>500</sup> *Case 1/1989*, 385. See also; *The Military Balance, 1987-1988* (London, 1987), 118

<sup>501</sup> Blanch, *Cuba: pequeño gigante*, 72



assertions that Cuban pilots had played a major role in the air strikes that stopped the South Africans.<sup>502</sup>

In the two-hour tank battle that ensued, the SADF drive was stopped. Cuban sources assert that the combined firepower of Cuban aircraft and FAPLA T-55 tanks and artillery destroyed seven SADF tanks and a number of other armoured vehicles.<sup>503</sup> The Angolan forces and Cuban pilots had thwarted the SADF efforts to encircle and destroy the 59th Brigade. In the evening, the 61st Mechanized and 4th South African Infantry withdrew.<sup>504</sup> Rather than the combined effort of Cuban Migs and FAPLA tanks, George ascribes the withdrawal to the SADF's need to replenish its supplies, a decision that "let the FAPLA off the hook."<sup>505</sup> Nevertheless, if the 59<sup>th</sup> brigade was in such disarray, why did the SADF not press home the advantage? The most plausible conclusion is that the SADF was compelled to withdraw.

### **THE CUBANS TAKE COMMAND**

At the time of the SADF attack of 13 January, most of the Cuban reinforcements were stationed at Menogue and had not made the 250-kilometer journey to Cuito Cuanavale.<sup>506</sup> The only Cuban personnel present at Cuito Cuanavale were military

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<sup>502</sup> See, for example, "Cuban warplanes in Angola attack South African forces: Associated Press", *Syracuse Herald Journal*, 21 January 1988; "Kaunda praises Cuban air raids on South Africans in Angola", *BBC Monitoring Service: Africa*, 25 January 1988; R. Kennedy, "Angolans besieged", *The Times*, 21 January 1988; P. Fletcher, "Angola Determined To Stop South Africans From taking Key Town", *Reuters*, 23 January 1988; "Besieged Angolan Town Rescued: Reuters", *Chicago Tribune*, 28 January 1988; and P. Fletcher, "Buoyant Young Cuban Troops Hold Lines Of Defence In Angola," *Reuters*, 3 March 1988

<sup>503</sup> Blanch, *Cuba: pequeño gigante*, 72

<sup>504</sup> Villegas Tamayo, Cuito Cuanavale, 150-151

<sup>505</sup> George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, p 218-220

<sup>506</sup> *Case 1/1989*, 384



advisers, weapon specialists and technicians flown in by helicopter.<sup>507</sup> With the threat of encirclement facing the 25th and 59th brigade, Havana also decided to send reinforcements to Cuito Cuanavale. On 14 January, a battalion of tanks and artillery were dispatched to Cuito Cuanavale.<sup>508</sup> Leaving Menogué on 17 January, the Cuban 70th Tank Brigade and the Angolan 10th Brigade arrived on 21 January.<sup>509</sup> Upon their arrival, the Cuban reinforcements encountered the Angolan brigades in a state of disarray. Yusmari Martínez Fuentes, a Cuban soldier, described the situation when his squadron arrived during an Angolan South African clash:

Already there were many FAPLA injured and many more dead, and in the middle of this bad situation, us, the Cuban squadron. We decided that neither the wounded nor the dead could be left in that situation. So we left with them and spent two or three days in the bush, until we meet up with another Cuban squadron.<sup>510</sup>

Before the decision was made to send the battalion, Havana insisted on assuming command of the defense of Cuito Cuanavale and all the Angolan forces in southern Angola. Castro emphasized that the Cuban representatives in Angola ask Angolan President Eduardo Santos “to turn over command of all the Angolan troops on the southern front to us.”<sup>511</sup> Castro outlined the Cuban rationale: “our forces were engaged in the battle, so we asked for the responsibility.”<sup>512</sup> The Cuban government reasoned that

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<sup>507</sup> See General R. M. Puente, *El Aire Siempre Fue Nuestro*, in *La Guerra De Angola* (La Habana: Editora Política, 1989), 168; *Case 1/1989*, 384; and Castro, *My Life*, 328

<sup>508</sup> Castro, *Vindicación de Cuba*, 399 and *Case 1/1989*, 384; Tamayo, *Cuito Cuanavale*, 151

<sup>509</sup> Gómez, *En El Sur de Angola*, 132

<sup>510</sup> Interview with Yusmari Martínez Fuentes, in M. D. Canter, *Operación Carlota: Paisajes de una epopeya* (La Habana, 2006), 109-110

<sup>511</sup> Castro, *My Life*, 328. See also *Case 1/1989*, 385

<sup>512</sup> *Case 1/1989*, 385



because Cuba's escalated involvement brought with it significant risks then they also had to ensure that (at least from their perspective) the proper military strategy was followed.

According to Havana, the proper military strategy required a unified command structure under General Leopoldo Cintra Frias. A unified command structure would ensure Cuban strategic and tactical choices dominated, while precluding those of the Soviet advisors. On assumption of overall command, the Cubans implemented a different approach. As Colonel Watson noted the "Cubans developed their own strategical thinking."<sup>513</sup> At the heart of the disagreements between the Cuban and Soviet military advisors lay a strategic issue broader than the redeployment of specific brigades. Dismayed by the FAPLA *débâcle*, the Cuban government decided that the opportunity, with all the implied risks, presented itself to inflict a military defeat on the SADF that would force Pretoria to leave Angola.

While, of course, Pretoria was not privy to Cuban strategic planning, the SADF General Staff was aware of the growing influence of Havana in the military operations. Geldenhuys noted that it was clear that "Castro and the Cuban generals had already taken command of all operations since January."<sup>514</sup> As Castro was the Commander-in-Chief of the Cuban armed forces, his increased role posed a new challenge to the South Africans. General Geldenhuys stated that the SADF general staff had "to take the Castro factor into account when assessing future Cuban intentions."<sup>515</sup> They were not familiar with his command style or his military abilities. Magnus Malan outlined the problem:

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<sup>513</sup> Interview Stuart Watson

<sup>514</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 239. See also George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, p 220

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.*



It gave us a problem from our side. We did not know his way of thinking. What kind of personality he was. Because that's the thing you need to know in war. You've got to know the chap on the other side as well as you know yourself. You must know his strong points and his weak points. That's how you are successful. Otherwise you are not.<sup>516</sup>

The main directives of the Cuban military command were to “maintain at all cost the defense of Cuito Cuanavale and guarantee that the town was not occupied by the enemy,” and, in coordination with FAPLA “to take all the necessary measures to ensure the stabilization of the defense.”<sup>517</sup> In its first major decision, the Cuban command insisted on the necessity to reduce the defensive lines, which required redeploying the FAPLA brigades to the west bank.<sup>518</sup> On 17 January, Havana communicated to General Arnaldo Ochoa, the Cuban military's liaison officer with FAPLA in Luanda, the need to move the Angolan brigades:

The current positions of the 59th and 25th Brigades are very risky since they are exposed to the possibility of a breakthrough in the area the 21st was located. We can't continue running those risks...The defense perimeter of the river should be reduced by pulling back the 59th and 25th Brigades towards positions that are well fortified and closer to the river.<sup>519</sup>

The 21<sup>st</sup> assumed a new defensive position in the rear of the Tumpo triangle, with Cuban and Angolan artillery repositioned on the west bank and in Cuito Cuanavale. Colonel Jan Breytenbach described these defensive line adjustments as an “astute move.”<sup>520</sup> These modifications would make it more difficult for the South Africans to find and hit military targets. It would also make it more difficult for opposing infantry and tanks to

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<sup>516</sup> *Cuba! Africa! Revolution!*

<sup>517</sup> Tamayo, Cuito Cuanavale, 148

<sup>518</sup> Misión Cubana, 37. See also George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, p 220

<sup>519</sup> *Case 1/1989*, 385

<sup>520</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 302



advance, eliminating or at least minimizing the dangers that had been exposed by the 13 January attack. This adjustment of lines, coupled with continued Cuban MiG-23s sorties stabilized the military situation.

However, the readjustment of the defensive lines did not go smoothly. While General Cintra Frias had *de jure* command of the forces in Cuito Cuanavale, he had yet to achieve *de facto* overall command and control. Apparently, there continued to be resistance from both Luanda and Moscow to Havana's assertion of control and implementation of a new approach to the defense of Cuito Cuanavale. Castro stated that the Cuban high command had to contend with initial reluctance "from our Angolan allies or Soviet advisors, to a readjustment of the defensive lines."<sup>521</sup> This dissent apparently encompassed a Cuban officer, General Ernio Hernandez Rodriguez, the commander of a tank company assigned to Cuito Cuanavale. After initially obeying the order by Cintra Frias to withdraw to the west bank, the Angolans decided to reclaim their abandoned positions. General Dumba and Hernandez Rodriguez decided to reorganize the remnants of the 21st Brigade. On 20 January, the 21st, together with the 59<sup>th</sup>, crossed the Cuito River, driving out the UNITA troops and reoccupying its previous position.<sup>522</sup> Dumba and Hernandez Rodriguez ordered the crossing of the Cuito River and reoccupation of the east bank positions "although we knew that the front was being restructured and better, more defensible positions were being taken up."<sup>523</sup> They reasoned that it was necessary to seize back the lost positions in order to raise the morale of and convince the FAPLA soldiers that they could successfully resist the South African attacks. General

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<sup>521</sup> *Case 1/1989*, 386

<sup>522</sup> Interview with Brigadier General Ernio Hernandez Rodriguez, 394; *Misión Cubana*, 37 and Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 302

<sup>523</sup> Interview with Brigadier General Ernio Hernandez Rodriguez, 394



Hernandez Rodriquez underscored the significance he attached to the military actions: “It was a month of gaining and losing territory. It was our first victory in Cuito Cuanavale.”<sup>524</sup>

Nevertheless, regardless of the success, the Cuban command vehemently disapproved of this redeployment and ordered the 21<sup>st</sup> and 59<sup>th</sup> brigades to return to the west of the river.<sup>525</sup> Havana was so upset, that on 26 January Castro cabled: “I don’t understand what’s going on in Cuito? Who’s in charge in Cuito?” Castro argued that it was premature to engage in any action on the east-bank because “the danger hadn’t passed” that the South Africans would launch another major attack.<sup>526</sup> This apprehension was borne out on 14 February at 8:45 am when the SADF attacked the 59th brigade.<sup>527</sup> Due to the failure to readjust the lines, Castro described the resulting situation as “the same thing all over again.”<sup>528</sup> In the initial stages the 14 February battle mirrored the 13-14 January engagement.

The SADF committed a considerable force to the 14 February offensive, deploying more than 100 vehicles.<sup>529</sup> The attack consisted of “three prongs.”<sup>530</sup> First, several UNITA battalions attacked the 21st Brigade. Cuban sources indicate that UNITA

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<sup>524</sup> *Ibid.*, 394

<sup>525</sup> *Misión Cubana*, 37

<sup>526</sup> *Case 1/1989*, 386

<sup>527</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 274

<sup>528</sup> *Case 1/1989*, 386.

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid.*, 386

<sup>530</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 302



deployed six battalions.<sup>531</sup> Second, the 4th South African Infantry, including a tank squadron and many Ratel armoured cars, attacked the 59th Brigade. The goal of these two attacks was to distract the two FAPLA brigades from the main thrust led by the 61st Mechanized under the command of Commandant Mike Muller. Third, the 61st drove through the gap between the 59th and 21st. The 61st consisted of a tank squadron, two companies of mechanized infantry, two armoured car squadrons, a mortar platoon and an engineer platoon.<sup>532</sup>

The 61st Mechanized advanced through the five-kilometer gap and, together with the 4th, encircled the 59th.<sup>533</sup> The 59th Brigade broke under the pressure and was routed, suffering high casualties as “FAPLA soldiers were mown down as they climbed out of their positions and tried to flee.”<sup>534</sup> In full retreat, the soldiers of the 59th fled to the safety of the Tumpo Triangle. The decimation of the 59th placed the 21st and the 25th - which was also on the east-bank of the Cuito River - in grave danger. The SADF was poised to capture the Cuito Bridge, which would have blocked the brigades escape route, allowing the South Africans to “completely surround all three Angolan brigades.”<sup>535</sup> This was only prevented by “a desperate counter-attack”<sup>536</sup> by a Cuban-Angolan tank force.

The tank battle that ensued lasted more than eight hours, pitting the South African Olifants (South African redesigned and upgraded 1950s British Centurions)

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<sup>531</sup> Blanch, *Cuba: pequeño gigante*, 73

<sup>532</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 274. See also Jimenez Gomez, *En El Sur de Angola*, 177-8

<sup>533</sup> *Case 1/1989*, 386

<sup>534</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 275. See Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 303

<sup>535</sup> *Case 1/1989*, 386

<sup>536</sup> *Ibid.*, 386



against the Cuba-Angolan Soviet T-55s and T-62s.<sup>537</sup> Colonel Breytenbach described the confrontation as “an exciting tank” battle.<sup>538</sup> In the ensuing clash, the steadfast performance of the Cubans and Angolans impressed the South Africans. Mike Muller praised them for fighting “valiantly to protect 59th Brigade as it fled...”<sup>539</sup> Though outnumbered the Cuban-Angolan force managed to provide the required cover for the 59th’s retreat. However, the 59th’s escape and survival was secured at a considerable cost. According to Castro seven Cuban tanks were lost, with fourteen Cubans killed.<sup>540</sup> Hernandez Rodriquez’s tank company lost five of their seven tanks through enemy fire.<sup>541</sup> The Cuban figures coincide quite closely with the South African accounts. Mike Muller also stated that the 61st destroyed seven tanks.<sup>542</sup> SADF Colonel Deon Ferreira stated that fourteen tanks had been destroyed and four Cuban tank commanders killed.<sup>543</sup> The additional seven tanks mentioned by Ferreira might be a miscount or refer to Angolan tanks that were also destroyed. Overall, FAPLA’s loss of equipment and life was quite high. Besides the Cuban-Angolan tank-forces losses, Ferreira stated that four hundred Angolan soldiers were killed and eight armoured vehicles, one BM-21 Stalin Organ, and a SAM-133 antiaircraft system destroyed.<sup>544</sup>

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<sup>537</sup> Interview with Brigadier General Ernio Hernandez Rodriquez, 396

<sup>538</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 302

<sup>539</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 278

<sup>540</sup> *Case 1/1989*, 386. See also Blanch, *Cuba: pequeño gigante*, 73; and Campos Perales *Victoria Al Sur De Angola* (La Habana, 2006), 46

<sup>541</sup> Interview with Brigadier General Ernio Hernandez Rodriguez, 395

<sup>542</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 278

<sup>543</sup> *Ibid.*, 280

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*, 280



The South Africans did not escape unscathed, though their losses were a mere fraction of the Angolan and Cuban losses. By mid-morning, Cuban MiG-23s, based in Menogue, began a series of unrelenting attacks. Brigadier General Hernandez Rodriquez said he and others considered the intervention of the MiG-23s as the key to successfully securing the safe retreat of the three Angolan brigades.<sup>545</sup> The constant bombing runs forced the South Africans to stop their operations and seek cover. Mike Muller, the commanding officer of the 61st, stated “the enemy craft were permanently in the air dropping thousands of tonnes of bombs all over the show...in the course of hundreds of attacks.”<sup>546</sup> For most of 14 February, the SADF had managed to evade the attacks and, thus, avoid casualties. However, later that day, a MiG-23 bombing run killed four soldiers from the 4th South African Infantry.<sup>547</sup>

Artillery also claimed South African victims. The Cuban-Angolan counterattack had been supported by an artillery barrage of more than four hours.<sup>548</sup> Particularly, dangerous were the Zu23 guns, which fired 23mm shells. On more than one occasion, the salvos hit a South African target. Artillery fire knocked out the Ratel of Hein Groenewald, who served in a mechanized infantry battalion attached to the 61<sup>st</sup> Brigade.<sup>549</sup> While Groenewald emerged alive, others were not so fortunate. As artillery shells killed another Ratel crew, Mike Muller witnessed their deaths:

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<sup>545</sup> Interview with Brigadier General Ernio Hernandez Rodriquez, 396; General Ruben Martinez Puente, *El aire siempre fue nuestro*, in *La Guerra De Angola* (La Habana, 1989), 168

<sup>546</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 280

<sup>547</sup> *Ibid.*, 280

<sup>548</sup> Interview with Brigadier General Ernio Hernandez Rodriquez, 396

<sup>549</sup> Interview Hein Groenewald Pretoria, 2 August 2006



A burst of four shells hit their vehicle directly: the holes were 20cm apart. All four were killed instantly by flying metal and by the speed of the shells that caused a massive displacement of air. They were badly wrecked up and weren't human beings anymore, just a hand here and a head there, a piece of rib there.<sup>550</sup>

George characterized the counterattack as a "disaster" because of Cuban losses.<sup>551</sup>

However, the counterattack accomplished its goal; it saved the Angolan brigades. The counterattack gained the necessary time for the FAPLA brigades to withdraw and regroup. Eventually, all three Angolan brigades retreated into the safety of the Tumpo Triangle. In response, the SADF withdrew its forces. While inflicting heavy losses on the Angolan and Cuban forces, they had failed to destroy the brigades and achieve a major breakthrough. In combination with the counterattack, the artillery bombardment and air-strikes prevented the South Africans from achieving their objective.

#### **THE READJUSTMENT STRUGGLE**

Despite the success of the counter-attack, Castro and the Cuban high command were incensed. They viewed the escape as a near disaster that could have been easily averted, the inevitable result of not following the instructions to adjust the defensive lines by pulling the Angolan forces back to the west of the Cuito River. As the SADF prepared its next major attack, this was the theme that dominated Cuban preoccupations: the correct strategic approach was paramount. From 15 February until month's end, Havana waged a constant struggle to readjust the defensive lines and deployment of the FAPLA forces. This is reflected in a series of frenetic and almost frantic communications between Castro and General Ochoa. On 15 February, Castro sent a message to Angola admonishing those in charge:

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<sup>550</sup>Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 279

<sup>551</sup>George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, p 22-223



After the mistake made and the time that was lost in adjusting the defense of Cuito[Cuanavale], it is necessary to keep a cool head...We must be more alert and aware to avoid surprises and mistakes. I must frankly say that here we feel bitter over what happened because it was repeatedly anticipated and warned about.<sup>552</sup>

However, the lines were still not adjusted to Havana's likening as the FAPLA brigades remained on the east bank. This only increased Havana's frustration and apprehension at the tardiness in withdrawing the brigades to the west of the river. In a 20 February message, Castro outlined the ramifications of delaying the necessary readjustments, painting the situation in the direst terms. He argued that if the adjustment did not occur, FAPLA faced a serious military defeat, claiming that such a defeat would have profound implications for Angola:

You must keep in mind the dangers of the situation on the east of the river. If the enemy is able to break through our defenses, the Angolan forces will have their backs to the river and might suffer heavy losses including those drowned, killed or captured and it would be a total disaster. Should that happen, it would be hard to hold Cuito [Cuanavale] and the political and morale consequences for FAPLA and the Angolan government would be terrible.<sup>553</sup>

This was followed the next day by another - even more frantic - message reiterating the calamitous prospects that faced Angola if the proper defensive measures were not adopted. Again the imperative of redeploying Angolan forces on the west of the Cuito River was underscored. Especially alarming to Havana was the condition of the Cuito Bridge. The continual South African bombardment of the bridge rendered the only effective route of evacuation almost impassable. If the SADF launched another offensive, the Angolan forces would be trapped, with no means of escape, leading to their annihilation. An existential threat loomed over Luanda. Unless the defensive lines

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<sup>552</sup> *Case 1/1989*, 386

<sup>553</sup> *Ibid.*, 387



were measures were immediately readjusted, FAPLA faced a crippling *débâcle* from which it would be unable to recover. The 21 February cable outlined these repercussions:

We really fail to understand the slow pace of action in Cuito Cuanavale. A whole week has passed since the events of February 14 and so far only two battalions of the 21st Brigade have crossed to the west of the river. According to our estimates, there are still about 3,500 Angolan soldiers and a lot of equipment that should have been taken west. Worst of all, is the news received today is that the bridge is totally useless with several different sections destroyed and it is almost impossible to get across...A great many days have been lost...we feel there is a lack of foresight, that those in charge there don't realize the terrible effects on the military and political situation and on morale a disaster with the forces east of the river would have, and we don't even have a few boats to do what the British did with theirs in Dunkirk.<sup>554</sup>

Despite the sense of desperation, almost fatalism, pervading, this message, Havana prevailed and the lines were readjusted. The SADF general staff noted the adjustment. At the 14 March meeting of the SSC, Geldenhuys acknowledged that the FAPLA brigades "became compelled to move round to the west of the River Cuito."<sup>555</sup> By the beginning of March, under the supervision of General Cintra Frias, all the Angolan forces, except for one battalion of the 25th brigade, had moved to the west of the river. The battalion stayed on the east bank as a foil to and monitor for any forthcoming South African offensive. All artillery was, also, repositioned on the west side, with tanks stationed in the rear. While, George does not discuss the readjustment of defensive lines in detail,<sup>556</sup> it was a key episode in the 1987-88 conflict as this redpolymment was to have a significant impact on the subsequent course of the battle for Cuito Cuanavale.

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<sup>554</sup> *Ibid.*, 387

<sup>555</sup> SVR 5/88, 2, from MoD [Group 6]

<sup>556</sup> George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, p 221



## THE CLASH OF STRATEGIES

The struggle for Cuito Cuanavale now entered the decisive phase: the struggle over the Tumpo Triangle. The SADF general staff viewed the 14 February mauling of the 59th Brigade as restoring the initiative that they had lost when the FAPLA brigades had successfully retreated to Cuito Cuanavale from the Lomba River. In their assessment, the opportunity now existed “to press home the military ascendancy that they had thrown away” in December 1987, when the FAPLA brigades had escaped destruction.<sup>557</sup> In their view the Angolan forces in the Tumpo Triangle were extremely vulnerable. With these forces now concentrated in this salient, the SADF decided to drive them out as the prelude to capturing Cuito Cuanavale.<sup>558</sup>

The ground commanders did not share the optimism of the SADF general staff. As in their previous objections, they did not agree that the correct plan was an attack from the east, which played into the strengths of the Angolan-Cuban defensive lines. As before, they favoured an outflanking attack from the west that would avoid the well-organized eastern defences of Cuito Cuanavale, allowing the SADF to capture the town from the “rear.” They did not share the assessment that the Cuban-Angolan formations were weak. The withdrawal into the Tumpo Triangle had concentrated these forces, which now made them a formidable foil to any attack. Moreover, the ground commanders knew that the Cubans and Angolans had laid extensive minefields in front of the brigades’ positions, and redeployed artillery to cover the Tumpo Triangle. Nevertheless, the general staff persisted in their determination to seize the Tumpo

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<sup>557</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 281

<sup>558</sup> *Ibid.*, 282



Triangle. Breytenbach unequivocally condemned the General Staff's plan as oblivious to the reality of the military situation:

Circumstances had changed and only a fool would force an attack on a hardened and contracted bridgehead covered by deep and extensive minefields...It was too late to do anything effective in the Tumpo Sector...The SADF, however, did have its fair share of fools in the rarified atmosphere at the top...Instead it was decided that only more of the same would succeed.<sup>559</sup>

This persistence directly played into Cuban and Angolan hands. Cintra Frias, now having effective control of the forces in Cuito Cuanavale, anticipated the South African attack on the Tumpo Triangle and took steps to strengthen the defenses. From the previous attacks, it became clear that the destruction of the Angolan brigades deployed to the town's east was integral to the SADF's strategy. In anticipation, Cintra Frias began mining the approaches to the flood plain inside the Tumpo Triangle.<sup>560</sup> He also deployed artillery on the highest points on the west bank of the Cuito River, overlooking the Tumpo Triangle. Some of the "FAPLA artillery was placed on a hill in Cuito Cuanavale."<sup>561</sup> The minefields ensured that any South African attack would either fall on the mines or take a route that would expose them to a concentrated and continual artillery barrage. Breytenbach described the minefields as "cunningly developed," which "would canalize any future South African attacks against the Tumpo Triangle into well-placed killing grounds."<sup>562</sup> The SADF field commanders knew they faced a daunting challenge:

Get through the minefields and the trench lines and then you would become sitting ducks for the artillery. At the same time the enemy warplanes would be overhead all the time, and your own Air Force would

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<sup>559</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 304

<sup>560</sup> Tamayo, Cuito Cuanavale, 152

<sup>561</sup> Interview with General Jorge Dumba

<sup>562</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 303



be unable to help out because despite all the skills, ingenuity and courage of South Africa's pilots, the Mirage obsolescence factor outweighed all the qualities of the SAAF's men could bring to bear in the Tumpo Triangle.<sup>563</sup>

## **THE TUMPO TRIANGLE**

The next and last phase of the battle for Cuito Cuanavale was characterized by three separate South African attacks on the Tumpo Triangle, on 25 and 29 February and 23 March. At this point, a clear difference of emphasis emerges between the South African and Cuban sources. The most authoritative South African accounts, principally Bridgland and Breytenbach, provide considerable detail on each of the attacks, highlighting the broader strategic issues, especially the readjustment of the defensive lines. In the Cuban accounts, this is clearly considered to be the most important aspect: the struggle for Cuito Cuanavale was settled by these readjustments. The Cuban sources, however, focus on the main and last of the three attacks. The greater detail provided on this attack (23 March), is due to it being the final effort by the SADF not only to drive the Angolans and Cubans from the Tumpo Triangle, but also capture Cuito Cuanavale. This reflects the Cuban tendency to treat all three attacks as being part of one episode of the conflict, whose denouement was the 23 March attack.

On 25 February, Colonel Pat McLoughlin, the commanding officer of the 20th South African Brigade, and in overall command, and Mike Muller, as field commander, led the first attack against the Tumpo Triangle. The 61st Mechanized spearheaded the assault, with 20 Olifant tanks, a paratrooper regiment, an anti-aircraft group, anti-tank specialists, a mortar squad and a contingent of engineers. UNITA's 800 strong 5th Regular Battalion accompanied the 61st. Three companies of the SADF 32nd battalion, a squadron of Ratel armoured vehicles, and another mechanized infantry battalion provided flank support. Two UNITA battalions were also committed to the flank

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<sup>563</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 295



operation. The 4th South African Infantry stood in reserve, ready to be called in for any supporting action that might be required.

Colonel McLoughlin's plan targeted the 25th Brigade, the only FAPLA force on the east bank of the Cuito River. While, the 61st comprised the main thrust, the 32nd Battalion, with the UNITA forces, went into action first. At 3:00 a.m., the 32nd attacked the 25th Brigade, from the south. This was a diversionary action designed to disguise the main point of attack. An artillery and mortar barrage accompanied the assault.<sup>564</sup> In response the 25th Brigade withdrew from their positions. What is unclear is whether the 25th abandoned their positions in a disorganized flight or as part of a planned retreat. The sources offer no definitive answer. Both Bridgland and Breytenbach unequivocally stated that the 25th took flight in fear: according to Bridgland "running away,"<sup>565</sup> with Breytenbach concurring that the 25th "broke and ran to the rear."<sup>566</sup>

Cuban sources do not comment extensively on the 25th's flight or retreat. This lack of commentary is not a question of silence on this particular issue, but a result of not dealing in detail with the 25 February attack. By the time of the 25 February attack, the defensive lines around Cuito Cuanavale had been readjusted according to Cuban instructions. However, Lt. Colonel Jimenez Gomez disagreed with Bridgland's and Breytenbach's evaluation of the actions of the 25th Brigade, stating that the 25th had been ordered to withdraw to positions nearer the river that had been prepared earlier.<sup>567</sup> With Cintra Frias now in effective control, it is quite plausible that the 25th Brigade was

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<sup>564</sup> Tamayo, Cuito Cuanavale, 152

<sup>565</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 296

<sup>566</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 304

<sup>567</sup> Gomez, *En El Sur*, 198



instructed to withdraw in the face of any South African attack, as opposed to attempting to hold onto to their positions, given the preparations already in place for the defense of the Tumpo Triangle.

Nevertheless, whether the 25th Brigade were driven out or left their positions in a planned retreat, the Angolan-Cuban artillery began to shell the 32nd Battalion, which took shelter in the vacated trenches. Major Tinus van Staden, the field commander of the 32nd, stated: “We were pinned down in the artillery bombardments for nine hours that day. It was just bombs, bombs, bombs all day.”<sup>568</sup> Also, as support for the artillery, Cuban fighter aircraft began heavy bombing raids that lasted throughout the day. Mike Muller stated that the Cuban fighters “appeared shortly afterwards and subsequently there were MiGs in the sky all day.”<sup>569</sup> Major van Staden noted: “We were bombed from all sides and from the air that day. The MiGs crossed our positions 56 times dropping bombs...”<sup>570</sup> With the occupation of the 25th Brigade’s positions by the 32nd Battalion, the next phase of the South African attack started with the main thrust by the 61st Mechanized Battalion. However, the advance immediately floundered in the newly laid minefields. As Breytenbach noted, General Cintra Frias, in anticipation of the SADF attack, “had sufficient time to prepare a few surprises.”<sup>571</sup> While the ground commanders knew that minefields had been laid, they were unaware of the extent, depth and density.

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<sup>568</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 304

<sup>569</sup> *Ibid.*, 296

<sup>570</sup> *Ibid.*, 305

<sup>571</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 305



Thus, while SADF engineers successfully cleared a path through one minefield, the 61st ran into “another unsuspected one.”<sup>572</sup> Four tanks lost their tracks and were immobilized. Mike Muller, the field commander, was in one of the disabled tanks. Having cleared the first minefield:

after another 100 m we ran into another minefield. I was about 20 m behind the first line of Olifants, but my tank was the first to be hit. It was one of the new Soviet M-57 anti-tank mines. It took the tracks off my tank.<sup>573</sup>

The explosion of the anti-tank mines revealed the location of the 61st, allowing the artillery in Cuito Cuanavale to target the advancing South Africans. A Cuban tank battalion deployed on the river’s west bank assisted the artillery barrage by turning their guns on the South Africans.<sup>574</sup> The shelling was so intense that Muller described being “engulfed by the biggest FAPLA artillery barrage of the war. It was bloody hellish.”<sup>575</sup> The SADF could not respond with its own artillery because muzzle flashes would have exposed the positions of their guns, allowing the Cuban pilots to pinpoint them and attack. The continual presence of MiGs neutralized the G5s and G6s, ensuring that the SADF artillery was a non-factor.<sup>576</sup> Muller pointed out that the SADF “G5s had stopped firing because there was [sic] always two, three or sometimes four MiGs in the air and our artillery could not afford to betray their position.”<sup>577</sup> As a consequence, the 61st

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<sup>572</sup> *Ibid.*, 305

<sup>573</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

<sup>574</sup> Castro, *Vindicacion de Cuba*, 403. See also Gomez, *En El Sur*, 198

<sup>575</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 296

<sup>576</sup> Blanch, *Cuba: pequeño gigante*, 74

<sup>577</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 296



began to sustain casualties. For example, shrapnel killed a Corporal Hendriks.<sup>578</sup> Also a vehicle sent into to recover one of the disabled tanks was hit by a shell and destroyed. Muller stated, “it burned out completely.”<sup>579</sup>

A special team was dispatched to clear the path for the tanks. The position of each mine had to be marked and then detonated. This process was very slow. In the end, the 61st took more than five hours to transverse the minefield. Around 12:30 pm the tanks started moving along the path into the Tumpo Triangle.<sup>580</sup> As Muller drove into the Tumpo Triangle, an advance company of the 32nd Battalion linked up with the 61st. However, to mark its location so that it could be easily found by the 61st, it released a yellow smoke marker. This proved to be a serious error, as it revealed to the Angolan-Cuba artillery the positions of the approaching 61st and the waiting company of the 32nd. Muller observed: “That was a mistake as it drew heavy and accurate artillery fire.”<sup>581</sup> Major van Staden stated: “Soon the enemy artillery was shooting at us. It was worse than before. They hammered us.”<sup>582</sup> As a result the casualties mounted. By 3:00 p.m., the artillery barrage had destroyed five Ratels. In one of the destroyed Ratels, the commander lost both of his legs. In another case, a shell killed the driver of an Olifant tank. The casualties were so severe that Muller said: “All our ambulances and recovery vehicles were busy taking the dead and wounded to medical posts in the rear.”<sup>583</sup>

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<sup>578</sup> *Ibid.*, 297

<sup>579</sup> *Ibid.*, 297

<sup>580</sup> *Ibid.*, 298, and Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 305

<sup>581</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 298

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*, 305

<sup>583</sup> *Ibid.*, 298



With the delay in the minefield, growing vulnerability to artillery and the mounting casualties, the attack came to a halt, leading to the withdrawal of the 61st Mechanized and the 32nd Battalion. Muller cited the delays and the casualties as the reasons he requested permission from Colonel McLoughlin to cease the attack and withdraw.<sup>584</sup> The minefields and the Cuban-Angolan artillery proved to be too much of an obstacle. Despite occupying the abandoned position of the 25th Brigade, the 61st and the 32nd battalion could not retain them in the face of the constant artillery bombardment. In Breytenbach's assessment, the Angolans and Cubans had "overwhelming artillery superiority."<sup>585</sup> One SADF observer estimated that there had been 1,350 accurate artillery hits that day.<sup>586</sup> As previously noted, the SADF could not neutralize the artillery in and around Cuito Cuanavale, as South African artillery could not be deployed under the constant presence of the MiGs. Moreover, Cuban air superiority also ensured that the SAAF could play no role. The absence of South African aircraft was not lost on the South African troops. Major van Staden observed that in the February offensive, they had "had no support from our own Air Force."<sup>587</sup>

Minefields, artillery and fighter aircraft were central factors in the failure of the SADF's 25 February offensive. Of equal - if not greater - importance was the SADF general staff's underestimation of the defensive measures deployed by the General Cintra Frias, particularly the redeployment of artillery and the laying of the minefields.<sup>588</sup> Both

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<sup>584</sup> *Ibid.*, 298. See also Tamayo, Cuito Cuanavale, 153

<sup>585</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 305

<sup>586</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 299

<sup>587</sup> *Ibid.*, 305

<sup>588</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 305-306



had proved critical in blunting the impetus of the attack, and then making it impossible not only to continue further but also to hold territory already occupied. Nevertheless, despite these experiences - and these lessons - the 29 February and 23 March attacks would, in turn, repeat the same pattern.

To address the problems revealed by the 25 February attack, Colonel McLoughlin decided to launch a night attack. McLoughlin reasoned that the South African artillery would be able to operate at nighttime, challenging the Angolan-Cuban artillery. Also, the dark would make it extremely difficult for the Angolan artillery to acquire targets, rendering them ineffective.<sup>589</sup> Moreover, the MiGs' ability to locate and hit targets would be greatly compromised, thus, neutralizing their "superiority over the Tumpo Triangle."<sup>590</sup> McLoughlin selected Mike Muller to lead the second attack on the Tumpo Triangle scheduled for the night of 29 February. Muller would lead the 61st into the Tumpo Triangle along the southern bank of the Dala River. McLoughlin hoped that by taking this route, the advance would remain unobserved. The 61st Mechanized was equipped with 22 Olifant tanks organized in two tank squadrons. Also, attached were a Ratel squadron, a mechanized infantry company, a platoon of mortars, two infantry Battalions of the 32nd and two UNITA infantry battalions. As in the 25 February attack, the 4th South African Infantry was held in reserve.<sup>591</sup>

However, the attack was delayed due to a lack of mine-clearing vehicles and the malfunction of five tanks. As a result, Muller was left with only 16 tanks.<sup>592</sup> It had also

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<sup>589</sup> *Ibid.*, 306

<sup>590</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 308

<sup>591</sup> *Ibid.*, 309

<sup>592</sup> *Ibid.*, 311



begun to rain heavily, limiting visibility. Consequently, Mike Muller “requested permission to delay the attack until first light.”<sup>593</sup> By 10:00 a.m. the next day, 1 March, the 61st had advanced approximately one kilometer into the Tumpo Triangle along the southern bank of the Dala River, entering thick bush cover. As the 61st slowly pushed onwards, Muller ordered the tanks not to fire on any enemy positions or targets in order to avoid giving away their position. Eventually, they reached a position four kilometers northeast of the Cuito Bridge.

The delay meant that the attack was not launched at night, but in full daylight. The element of surprise was lost before the 61st had the opportunity to engage any FAPLA troops as it was now exposed to air and artillery attack. At noon Cuban MiG-23s and Angolan MiG-21s began flying sorties against the 61st. Soon after the air attacks began, the lead tanks hit a minefield. The exploding mines allowed the Angolan-Cuban artillery to determine the location of the advancing South African formation and effectively target them. The resulting artillery barrage gave the 61st “a really torrid time.”<sup>594</sup> In response, the SADF command decided to respond in kind. The G5 guns, together with the mortars and Ratels of the 61st opened fire on the gun emplacements on the west bank of the Cuito River. However, despite firing “many hundreds of rounds”<sup>595</sup>, the SADF could not neutralize the Angolan-Cuban artillery.

Moreover, the 61st was trapped in the minefield, its speed and degree of movement limited by the surrounding mines. Also, several tanks had been immobilized by the mines or had broken down. This only increased its vulnerability to the shelling.

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<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.*, 309

<sup>594</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 306

<sup>595</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 311



The Zu23 artillery guns deployed by FAPLA were again particularly effective. Muller described these cannons as “daunting.”<sup>596</sup> According to Muller, the UNITA infantry fared the worst as they had very little protection from the relentless shelling. The UNITA infantry either traveled on foot or rode on the outsides of the tanks. Muller witnessed the carnage:

Those 23-mm guns were just wiping the UNITA blokes off the tanks. Even when I close my eyes now I can still see it clearly...Ahead of my command Ratel was an Olifant with five UNITA infantry sitting on its engine plate. When the 23-mm burst came they began getting off to take cover. As they jumped off one of them was hit with a 23-mm shell. His head just disintegrated.<sup>597</sup>

As on 25 February, the shelling and minefields proved an insurmountable barrier to the SADF advance.<sup>598</sup> Exposed to an incessant artillery barrage and bogged down in the minefield, Muller decided to tactically withdraw from the minefield to regroup. He wanted to find an alternate route and develop a plan for eliminating the 23-mm guns. However, despite the withdrawal, the shelling of the 61st continued: the Angolan-Cuban artillery continued to target the 61st as it withdrew. Compounding Muller’s problems, only five tanks were operational.<sup>599</sup> At this point, the SADF general staff decided to end the attack. The second effort to seize the Tumpo Triangle had failed. This failure did not go unnoticed in western newspapers. *The Economist* noted that the SADF was “bogged down in Cuito Cuanavale.”<sup>600</sup> Another article in *The Economist* returned to the theme of the SADF inability to seize the town: “Something could be happening in Angola’s

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<sup>596</sup> *Ibid.*, 311

<sup>597</sup> *Ibid.*, 311

<sup>598</sup> Tamayo, Cuito Cuanvale, 153

<sup>599</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 312

<sup>600</sup> “Angola’s deadly stalemate”, *The Economist*, 27 February 1988



interminable war. A strong South African force, advancing in support of Mr. Jonas Savimbi's UNITA rebels, has been stuck for six weeks at Cuito Cuanavale."<sup>601</sup>

This second failure appears to have unsettled, or at least evoked concern in, the upper echelons of the SSC and the South African military. George noted that the SADF command was alarmed by the casualties and loss of equipment, leading to their decision to implement "tactical changes."<sup>602</sup> However, he does not convey the sense of crisis that gripped Pretoria, indicated by the replacing of ground commanders and senior SADF figures to the South African field headquarters. During the 29 February /1 March offensive, General Geldenhuys (SADF Chief of Staff) and General Kat Liebenberg (South African Army Chief of Staff) and several other generals arrived at the command headquarters. Breytenbach captured the agitated state of the generals, describing the new arrivals as "anxiously ensconced" in the field headquarters dispensing "unwarranted advice and even orders whenever they felt like it."<sup>603</sup> Nevertheless, whatever the psychological state of the generals, with the failure of the second attack, they decided to formally end Operation *Hooper*, designating the next set of military actions as Operation *Packer*.

The SADF General Staff concluded that changes were required at the overall and field command levels.<sup>604</sup> The General Staff attributed the failure of the two Tumpo attacks to the inability of the Colonel McLoughlin and Commandant Muller to prosecute the actions correctly and competently. On 8 March 1988, Colonel Paul Fouche,

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<sup>601</sup> "Aliquid novi: Angola", *The Economist*, 19 March 1988

<sup>602</sup> George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, p 227

<sup>603</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 306

<sup>604</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 315



commanding officer of the 82nd South African Brigade replaced Colonel McLouglin as the overall commander of the South African forces at Cuito Cuanavale. Commandant Gerhard Louw, a tank and armoured combat vehicle instructor, succeeded Mike Muller as ground commander.

### **THE THIRD & LAST ATTACK ON THE TUMPO TRIANGLE**

The SADF faced a more daunting problem than a change in command personnel. As in November 1987, when it failed to destroy the retreating Angolan brigades, the SADF had to contend with serious logistical problems. New troops and supplies were required. The long campaign had worn equipment out. Armoured personnel carriers, G5 artillery pieces and tanks had to be repaired or replaced. For example, many G5 guns were so worn out that a battery of older G2 guns from the Second World War were deployed to buttress the South African artillery. These guns had a much lower range of 16 km (10 miles).<sup>605</sup> Compounding the equipment problem, many of the troops were physically and emotionally drained. Due to their exhaustion, many succumbed to “the sheer strain, fatigue and tension” of the long campaign.<sup>606</sup>

The Angolan intervention, especially the actions in the Cuito Cuanavale theatre, had exhausted the SADF battalions. Consequently the SADF faced a serious personnel shortage. The militarization of the apartheid regime led to the expansion of the military. Between 1975 and 1989, the SADF more than doubled its number of troops: from 50,000 to 103,000. Also, compulsory national service in the armed forces for South African white males was increased to two years from one year. There was a parallel increase in the size of the armed forces reserves and the Citizen Force, a separate institution that

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<sup>605</sup> *Ibid.*, 323; Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 308.

<sup>606</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 315



supplemented the professional and permanent SADF troops. By the late 1980s, the reserves had increased to 140,000, while the Citizen Force had grown to 325,000. Together the SADF, reserves and the Citizen Force could mobilize between 500,000 to 600,000 men.<sup>607</sup>

Therefore, to counter the problem of physical and mental fatigue, after the failure of the second attack on the Tumpo Triangle, Pretoria turned to the Citizen Force. The SADF drew new and fresh replacements from the Citizen Force regiments as opposed to regular, career and seasoned soldiers. The exhaustion of the SADF soldiers amounted to more than that the simple wearing-down of individual soldiers; it represented the wearing down and exhaustion of the most experienced battle-ready South African troops. A significant distinction separated the Citizen Force from the permanent SADF formations. On one hand, the SADF regular formations constituted the professional soldiers: a permanent force of the most experienced and committed soldiers. On the other, the Citizen Force represented a civilian militia that could be called up on a temporary basis. The Citizen Force consisted of reservists, who having completed their terms of national service, continued to be on the active military rolls, though they had returned to civilian life. For example, among Louw's new recruits were a teacher and a car-salesman.<sup>608</sup>

Several Citizen Force regiments were called up and integrated into the 82nd South African Brigade. Among them were the Orange Free State President Steyn, Rivier De la Rey and Groot Karoo regiments. Nevertheless, the ability of Pretoria to call up members of the Citizen Force could not solve the SADF's personnel problem, as mere

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<sup>607</sup> Hamann, *Day of the Generals*, 1 & 99; International Institute for International Studies, *The Military Balance* (London, 1988)

<sup>608</sup> Interview with Colonel Gerhard Louw



numbers could not compensate for the deficit of combat-ready and battle-hardened soldiers. As these new reinforcements were not seasoned veterans or regulars, the SADF subjected them to training and preparation for the new attack on the Tumpo Triangle under the supervision of Commandant Gerhard Louw. Two problems beset Louw. First, he did not have enough time for training or preparation. He observed that the SADF “didn’t really have enough time to train the men thoroughly...it takes more time to get men who have been back in civilian life ready for battle than it does career soldiers and national service men.”<sup>609</sup> Second, the reservists did not have the same seriousness, dedication or *esprit de corps* as the SADF regulars. Louw described these new recruits as “naïve and innocent, who thought of the war as a big adventure.”<sup>610</sup> Louw had less than a month to prepare these new formations for an attack on the Tumpo Triangle.

The plan for the new attack on the Tumpo Triangle called for the 82nd Battalion, led by Louw, to dislodge the Angolan brigades and seize the area. To accomplish this task the South African force would drive directly into the flood plain, hitting the 25th Brigade on its left flank and then swing around to attack the 66th Brigade. The Regiment President Steyn would spearhead the assault by advancing along (from their perspective) the downward slope of Dala River, following it until the slope began to rise, and then as they reached the slope’s crest begin firing on the 25th Brigade. The objective was to isolate the FAPLA brigades from each other by driving a “wedge between” them.<sup>611</sup> The isolated and disorganized brigades would then be driven into the Cuito River. The reconstructed Cuito Bridge was also a target of the assault. As the strategic link between

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<sup>609</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 321

<sup>610</sup> Interview with Colonel Gerhard Louw

<sup>611</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 307



the east and west banks, its seizure or destruction would have made it impossible for the Angolan and Cuban forces in Cuito Cuanavale to come to the assistance of the 25th and 66th brigades. Breytenbach and Bridgland diverge on whether the immediate goal was to destroy or to capture the bridge, with Breytenbach asserting the goal was capture, Bridgland destruction.<sup>612</sup> Louw asserted the mission encompassed both possibilities: if the bridge could not be captured, it was to be destroyed.<sup>613</sup>

As preparations for the attack continued, the ground force commanders again expressed their reservations about the viability of the military strategy of attacking the Tumpo Triangle. As Helmoed-Romer Heitman observed after previous recent FAPLA encounters, under the command of Cintra Frias “[t]he situation at Cuito Cuanavale had stabilized.”<sup>614</sup> Therefore, the decision to launch a new assault on the fortified FAPLA position in the Tumpo, using the same approach as in the other two failed attempts, violated basic military logic. Louw had not been surprised that the other attacks had failed, questioning “the wisdom of sending tank forces into open ground sown with minefields and enfiladed by a formidable array of heavy artillery overlooking the battleground.”<sup>615</sup> The SADF deficit in artillery accentuated the difficulties faced by any South African attack. The 82nd would be unable to counter the Angolan artillery with their-own concentrated fire. Breytenbach noted that to oppose more than 60 Angolan large artillery pieces, an array of Zu23 guns and dozens of tanks deployed for fire

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<sup>612</sup> *Ibid*, 307; and Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 323

<sup>613</sup> Interview with Colonel Gerhard Louw; Colonel Gerhard Louw, *A Personal Account of Failure* (unpublished)

<sup>614</sup> Heitman, *War in Angola*, 296

<sup>615</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 322. Enfiladed is a military term referring to ability for artillery to target the length of a military formation.



support on the river's west bank, the SADF had only a battery each of G5 and the WW II-vintage G2 guns.<sup>616</sup>

This disparity did not augur well for the success of the South African attack. Breytenbach emphasized that "[t]he overall imbalance of combat power could only point to a disastrous outcome for Regiment President Steyn."<sup>617</sup> Given the experiences of the previous two Tumpo Triangle offenses, it should have been apparent that the SADF was unable to overcome the minefields and the artillery. As the SADF artillery would now be reduced to only two batteries of major artillery, the probability of success was not high. A direct attack into the Tumpo Triangle once again played directly into the Cuban and Angolan hands. Breytenbach incredulously noted that it was "remarkable that this stark reality did not occur to the General Staff."<sup>618</sup> Not surprisingly, the Cuban command concurred with Breytenbach. They also considered it foolhardy to launch a direct attack on the Tumpo Triangle. Moreover, they had expanded the minefields and deployed artillery in greater numbers and depth. Joaquin Soria, who served as a Lieutenant Colonel at Cuito Cuanavale, outlined the Cuban assessment:

According to our own conclusions, it was very unfavourable to deploy troops on the Cuito Cuanavale defense front because there was a very big flood plain between the Tumpo and Dala rivers, which was under the control of the direct fire of the tank cannons and artillery...It was disadvantageous to do this on such an uncovered terrain.<sup>619</sup>

The direct presence of General Liebenburg, Chief of the South African Army, and his staff at Colonel Fouche's command headquarters attested to the importance attached by

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<sup>616</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 308

<sup>617</sup> *Ibid*, 308

<sup>618</sup> *Ibid.*, 307

<sup>619</sup> Interview with Lieutenant Colonel Joaquin Soria, in the documentary *La respuesta de la esclada de sudafrica* (La Habana: Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionario, 1989)



Pretoria to the third attack on the Tumpo Triangle. General Liebenburg not only wanted to monitor the attack but intervene with orders if he deemed it had “become necessary to do so.”<sup>620</sup> Considered unwarranted interference, these interventions were not viewed kindly by the ground commanders. For example, Louw complained about unreasonable orders that were at odds with the reality of the situation he faced. While Louw would not single out or identify specific orders he disliked and rejected as unsound, he stated that during the attack he “almost resigned over bad command decisions.”<sup>621</sup>

In early March, troops of the 32nd battalion, the Regiment Groot Karoo and UNITA’s 4th Battalion swept the proposed attack route for mines. They detected and removed more than 200 mines.<sup>622</sup> On 19 March, the SAAF carried out a bombing raid on the Tumpo Triangle. Two days later, as a prelude to the attack, the South African artillery unleashed an artillery barrage against the Angolan-Cuban positions.<sup>623</sup> The Regiment Groot Karoo and the 32nd Battalion also engaged in a series of actions southeast of the Tumpo Triangle, designed to preoccupy and divert the attention of the Angolan and Cuban forces from the impending main attack. They also failed in an attempt to outflank the Cuban/Angolan position, suffering, according to General Lorente Leon, 18 deaths.<sup>624</sup> On the morning of 23 March, another bombing raid by the South African Airforce and artillery barrage specifically targeted the 25th Brigade. The Regiment President Steyn then advanced along the Dala River. Originally, the advance

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<sup>620</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 308

<sup>621</sup> Interview with Colonel Gerhard Louw

<sup>622</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 324

<sup>623</sup> Interview with General Lorente Leon, in R. R. Luis, *Preparense a vivir: Cronica de Cuito Cuanavale* (La Habana, 1989), 16

<sup>624</sup> *Ibid.*, 16



was planned for 6:00 a.m., but Louw, due to the overcast conditions, delayed it until the light was better. Once the light had improved, the Regiment President Steyn, with a battalion of UNITA infantry, advanced with the two squadrons of 26 Olifant tanks organized in a double column. Only one column had their lead tank equipped with a mine roller. Attached to the mine roller was a viper, a device used to explode mines ahead of an advancing formation.

At 9:00 a.m., as they were approaching the 25th Brigade's position, with Cuito Cuanavale visible in the distance on the west side of the Cuito River, the columns ran into a minefield. A tank in the column that did not have a mine roller hit a mine. Its tracks were blown off. Louw decided to halt the advance, recover the immobilized tank and to call up more mine sweepers. However, the mine-sweeping devices (a series of explosives tied together, called *plofadders*) malfunctioned. The immobilization of the tank and the mine-sweeping equipment malfunctions delayed the offensive by two-and-a-half hours. At around noon, with the tank recovered and a path cleared, Louw continued the advance along the Dala River toward the Tumpo Triangle.

Nonetheless, any chance of surprise was gone. The minefield that Louw's formation had run into was a "warning" mine field. It served to alert the Angolan and Cubans of any approaching South African troops. As Louw's forces came over the crest of the slope of the Dala River, they "could see the whole of Cuito Cuanavale spread out before us."<sup>625</sup> Alerted, by the explosion of the tank in the warning minefield, the FAPLA artillery began targeting the Regiment President Steyn as they came over the crest, with the advancing columns "drawing heavy fire because, for the first time, the FAPLA

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<sup>625</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 327



artillery could see exactly where we were...It got heavier and more accurate”<sup>626</sup> Despite, the growing artillery barrage, Louw now deployed his forces in open formation with tanks nine abreast.

However, the deployment occurred in the main minefield in front of the FAPLA Tumpo Triangle positions. Cuban and Angolans engineers had laid the minefield as part of a system of minefields designed to funnel the SADF (especially, tanks and armoured vehicles) into territory covered by the Angolan artillery.<sup>627</sup> To guide the laying of the mines, Cuban and Angolan scouts had identified the areas where tanks could be deployed. Bridgland described these as areas as “determined kill zones covered by massive artillery.”<sup>628</sup> The artillery had been arranged so that a South African attack from either direction could be targeted. Lieutenant Colonel Joaquin Soria stated that they had “set up our posture such that we could change our fire pattern in relation to any changes in the South African thrust.”<sup>629</sup>

To divert the South African advance into these zones, the minefields had been laid in such a manner that “[a] small gap was left where the South African army could enter” the Tumpo Triangle. Moreover, the areas through which the South Africans had launched their first two attacks had been re-mined.<sup>630</sup> Areas that the SADF had cleared in the previous attacks and assumed safe were again hazardous terrain for tanks or armoured personnel carriers to transverse. Also, the mines at the very front of the main

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<sup>626</sup> *Ibid*, 327

<sup>627</sup> Interview with General Hernandez Rodriguez, in Milton Diaz Canter, *Operación Carlota: Paisajes de una epopeya* (La Habana, 2006), 107

<sup>628</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 327

<sup>629</sup> Interview with Lieutenant Colonel Joaquin Soria

<sup>630</sup> *Ibid*.



minefield had been reinforced. The Cuban engineers created new booby traps, more powerful than conventional mines with “one or two boxes of TNT mounted on top of 2 or 3 anti-tank mines.”<sup>631</sup> The engineers had also laid the mines in an unconventional and unpredictable fashion, which “ran parallel, perpendicular and diagonally.”<sup>632</sup> Thus, Louw’s forces found themselves in extensive minefield, one measuring approximately 300m by 50m.<sup>633</sup>

Almost immediately upon entering the minefield and before reaching their designated firing positions,<sup>634</sup> at least three tanks of one squadron hit mines and were lost.<sup>635</sup> Louw decided to recover the tanks before continuing the advance. He ordered recovery vehicles to attempt towing the tanks out of the minefield. By this time, FAPLA artillery had launched another intense bombardment, targeting and “hitting the South Africans.”<sup>636</sup> Louw testified to the intensity of the fire: “By now the enemy seemed to be throwing everything towards us...Out of the corner of my eye, I saw missiles whistling over our heads...Mortar shells landed over all the place and 23-mm slugs crashed through the sound barrier.”<sup>637</sup> Due to the “danger of being well and truly pinned down in a sea of

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<sup>631</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>632</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>633</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 327

<sup>634</sup> *Ibid.*, 328; Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 308; Interview with General Jorge Dumba; Interview with Colonel Gerhard Louw; Interview with Lieut Colonel Joaquin Soria

<sup>635</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 328

<sup>636</sup> Interview with Jorge Dumba

<sup>637</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 328



mines,” Louw ordered the other squadron to retreat.<sup>638</sup> He planned to withdraw from the Angolan fire, regroup and resume the advance.

At 2:00 p.m., after efforts to retrieve the tanks failed, and amid the incessant FAPLA shelling, Louw requested from Colonel Fouche permission “to break off the attack.”<sup>639</sup> With shells falling all around the tanks, Louw decided “hell, let’s get out range.”<sup>640</sup> He abandoned the idea of re-launching the attack. The saturation of the shelling and the minefields were an insurmountable barrier. To continue the advance would have meant “moving into an area 2 km by 2 km that was exposed to concentrated fire.”<sup>641</sup> The attack, therefore, had come “to a grinding and definite assault.”<sup>642</sup> The SADF high command decided that the “potential casualties and loss of equipment were not worth it.”<sup>643</sup> Before the offensive, Louw had received orders to minimize “losses” among the South African forces.<sup>644</sup> As they withdrew, Louw tried to find a path by which to circumnavigate the minefield, stating that he was “loathe to move into the minefield”<sup>645</sup> and “really scared that we were going to veer into the minefield and lose more tanks.”<sup>646</sup> Compounding Louw’s predicament, the Cuban MiGs began to execute a

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<sup>638</sup> *Ibid*, 328

<sup>639</sup> *Ibid.*, 329

<sup>640</sup> *Ibid.*, 330

<sup>641</sup> Interview with Colonel Gerhard Louw

<sup>642</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 308. See also Heitman, *War in Angola*, 280

<sup>643</sup> Interview with Colonel Gerhard Louw

<sup>644</sup> Colonel G. Louw, *A Personal Account of Failure* (unpublished)

<sup>645</sup> Interview with Colonel Gerhard Louw

<sup>646</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 330



series of sorties against Louw's squadrons. Due to the overcast conditions, the Cuban fighters could not attack during the morning, but as conditions improved they were able to take to the air.

The artillery barrage continued. It was so intense that the area was covered in clouds of dust. General Dumba noted "you could smell the air."<sup>647</sup> Surrounded by mines and exposed to artillery and air bombardment, casualties of the retreating forces mounted.<sup>648</sup> For example, though actual numbers are not available, it seems clear from the accounts that the UNITA death toll was very high. The UNITA infantry had very little cover from FAPLA fire. To avoid the fire, they often rode on the backs of the SADF tanks and armoured cars. Of course, this provided very limited protection. Breytenbach stated that the FAPLA guns "swept the passengers from the tanks like chaff, while shrapnel from the artillery and mortar shells took a further toll."<sup>649</sup> Sergeant Jose Kupussu, who served in the 32nd Battalion concurred: "Thousands of UNITA died. Ah! You can't count the numbers."<sup>650</sup> Often the tanks' very actions would kill the men seeking shelter. UNITA soldiers would seek refuge from the fire by sheltering in the bins behind the turrets on the tanks' rears. When the tanks' turrets rotated to locate targets, the UNITA soldiers in the bins would be crushed. Louw bemoaned their fate: "It breaks my heart to think of the UNITA soldiers trying to seek shelter under the bin in the back of the turrets."<sup>651</sup>

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<sup>647</sup> Interview with General Jorge Dumba; Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 308

<sup>648</sup> The dispute on the extent of SADF casualties (specifically white) is dealt with in next chapter.

<sup>649</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 308

<sup>650</sup> Interview with Jose Kupussu

<sup>651</sup> Interview with Colonel Gerhard Louw. See also Interview with Hein Groenewald



Despite Louw's efforts during the retreat, the tanks continued to hit mines. The minefields proved to be too extensive to avoid. At least one squadron was bogged down. Breytenbach described the tanks as "a dozen flies caught in the sticky mess of flypaper."<sup>652</sup> In his 30 May 1988 address to the Ministerial Meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement, Fidel Castro ironically compared the status of the SAAF planes to that of the SADF tanks: "The South African planes were on the ground, and the South African tanks were flying."<sup>653</sup> It is disputed and not clear how many South African tanks were destroyed in the minefields and captured by FAPLA. From the South African side both Louw and Breytenbach stated that the SADF lost only three tanks.<sup>654</sup> While giving no exact figure, the Angolans and Cubans, however, insisted that considerably more than the three captured tanks were destroyed. General Dumba insisted that along with the three tanks there were other "destroyed and abandoned tanks still in those heavily-mined fields."<sup>655</sup> He insisted so many South African tanks were destroyed, that when Angolan President Dos Santos visited Cahama in neighboring Cunene province, "you could see the smoke from Cuito Cuanavale from the burning tanks."<sup>656</sup>

Nevertheless, whatever the level of destruction of the SADF tank squadrons, the third attack on the Tumpo Triangle had failed. The attempt to outflank the 25th Brigade had been turned back before the Regiment President Steyn reached its firing positions.

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<sup>652</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 309

<sup>653</sup> F. Castro, Address to the Ministerial Meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement, May 30th, 1988 in the *La respuesta* [documentary] (FAR, 1989)

<sup>654</sup> Interview with Colonel Gerhard Louw; Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 330-31; and Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 309.

<sup>655</sup> Interview with Jorge Dumba

<sup>656</sup> *Ibid.*



Without the destruction of these brigades, FAPLA would probably have not been able to hold onto the Tumpo Triangle. However, the SADF and its UNITA allies never posed a direct threat to the west side of the Cuito River where the majority of the Angolan forces were located. The repulse of the 23 March offensive “was a clear defeat of the SADF.”<sup>657</sup> This symbolized the failure of the three-month campaign to seize the beachhead on the east bank of the Cuito River and destroy the Angolan brigades. This was also the evaluation of the U.S. government. The reports of the United States Defence Intelligence Agency explicitly acknowledged the inability of the SADF to defeat the Angolan and Cuban forces. The 11 May 1998 report concluded that the South Africans had failed “to dislodge Cuban/FAPLA forces.”<sup>658</sup> The 12 December 1988 report concurred: “South African probes of defensive positions were firmly rebuffed.”<sup>659</sup> The decision to cease operations against the Tumpo Triangle also marked the end of the campaign to capture Cuito Cuanavale.

## CONCLUSION

Having launched three unsuccessful attacks on the Tumpo Triangle, Pretoria decided not to make any more attempts. Instead, the SADF elected to continue shelling the town and maintain a troop presence in the area. The SADF and UNITA laid a series of minefields around the entrance to the Tumpo Triangle to prevent or hamper any FAPLA offensive against South African positions.<sup>660</sup> On April 30th, 1988, the SADF general staff officially ended Operation *Packer* and implemented Operation *Displace*, under the

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<sup>657</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 330

<sup>658</sup> USDIA *Briefing* (1988), 4

<sup>659</sup> USDIA *Lessons Learned* (1988), 11

<sup>660</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 332-33; and Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 310



command of Commandant Piet Nel. The Citizen Force recruits were demobilized and bulk of the SADF forces withdrawn.

The minutes of the 11 April 1988 SSC meeting revealed evidence of the sense of crisis in the Botha regime generated by the failure at Cuito Cuanavale. Normally, the first item on the agenda for the 1988 meetings was the situation in Angola. However, the following comment appeared: “Note - In light of the pressing questions that the daily proceedings of the Council in the Cabinet Room must look after, the Chair indicated that the proceedings in the Situation Room were shortened.”<sup>661</sup> The note is then followed as usual by Agenda item 1, except that the subject matter is no longer Angola but Natal. This would have been the first opportunity to place anything on the Council record about the change in the situation in Cuito Cuanavale since the events at the end of March. However, all discussion of these events had presumably been solely reserved for the situation room meeting that had occurred beforehand. This is an example of the elaborate system of redaction the SSC maintained to keep out of the record any mention of South African forces beyond the country’s borders. In this instance this objective was aided by the mechanism of designating one set of discussions for “the Cabinet Room” while all discussion of “situations” are reserved for “the Situation Room.” When the military situation around Cuito Cuanavale was mentioned it was about UNITA forces, with no mention whatsoever of the SADF.

The end of the struggle for Cuito Cuanavale did not conclude the 1987-88 conflict: the last phase was yet to unfold. It overlapped the battle for Cuito Cuanavale, beginning on 10 March 1988 and culminating in the second half of 1988 with the outflanking of the SADF in southern Angola by Cuban, Angolan and SWAPO forces. The crucial component of this outflanking operation was the subsequent military buildup

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<sup>661</sup> SVR 7/88, 11 April 1988), 2, from MoD (Group 6)



on the Angolan/Namibian border, culminating in the 27 June 1988 battle of Calueque and Tchipa. The consequences and broader implications of this military buildup and quasi-encirclement of South African forces in Angola are explored in the next chapter.



## CHAPTER FOUR: AFTERMATH: MILITARY CONSEQUENCES

The outcome of the battle on the banks of the Cuito River had military and long-term implications beyond the immediate theatre of Cuito Cuanavale. It was increasingly viewed as a contest that would decisively influence the future trajectory of the conflict. The western media unambiguously reflected this view, casting Cuito Cuanavale as a strategic confrontation that would have profound consequences for Angola and “repercussions throughout southern Africa.”<sup>662</sup> Several newspapers presented it as a serious *débâcle* for the SADF. In March 1988, for example, the South African *The Weekly Mail* reported on “[t]he failure of South African and Unita forces to take Cuito Cuanavale despite months of heavy shelling could be Pretoria’s most crucial military setback in Angola since 1975...”<sup>663</sup> In the *Boston Globe*, Cuito Cuanavale was viewed as possibly marking “a turning point in the Angolan civil war.”<sup>664</sup> A *Reuters* report, reproduced in the *Sydney (Australia) Morning Herald*, mentioned that for the Angolans and Cubans there were signs that “a pivotal battle for the future of southern Africa was turning in their favour.”<sup>665</sup> The *New York Times* also echoed this assessment, describing

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<sup>662</sup> J. F. Burns, Hints “That Repression May Lead to Reform”, *New York Times*, 7 February 1988

<sup>663</sup> P. Van Nieverk, “January’s Cuito victory turns into February’s stalemate”, *The Weekly Mail*, 26 February - 3 March 1988

<sup>664</sup> C. Nickerson, “Turning Point In A Civil War? Angolans, Rebels Fight What May Be Pivotal Battle”, *Boston Globe*, 26 April 1988

<sup>665</sup> “The Battle For Key Town Turns in Favour Of Angola: Reuters”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 May 1988



the siege as “a pivotal battle for the future of southern Africa” that was “turning in the favour” of the Angolans and Cubans.<sup>666</sup>

However, the “turning in favour” of the battle for Angola and Cuba encompassed more than the military engagements in the geographical locale of the town and the South African failure to capture Cuito Cuanavale. At the centre lay subsequent developments in southern Angola. When Havana assumed overall command of the Angolan and Cuban forces, it had a broader strategic goal beyond simply the defense of Cuito Cuanavale. When the 15 November 1988 decision to send troops to Angola was made, Castro and the FAR general staff also decided that an opportunity existed to deliver a serious defeat to the SADF. Havana developed the military plan for the defense of Cuito Cuanavale as part of a larger operational undertaking in which combined Cuban and Angolan forces, though a *coup de main* would seize the initiative from Pretoria and reverse the military situation in Angola by forcing the SADF unto the defensive.

This chapter examines this *coup de main* by describing and analyzing the military consequences of the failure of the SADF to capture Cuito Cuanavale. The Cuban-directed and -led operation in southern Angola and the South African reaction to these actions form the core. Certain key issues are engaged. Central among these is determining the significance of the military manoeuvres and engagements that occurred on the Angolan/Namibia border in the second half of 1988. The chapter also addresses what is probably the most controversial question, viz., how many South Africans troops were killed during the 1987-1988 conflict?

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<sup>666</sup> J. Brooke, “Angolans besting South Africa in a remote battle”, *New York Times*, 18 May 1988. Also see R. Kennedy, “Tit for tat threats precede London meeting on Angola”, *The Times*, 2 May 1987



## **OUTFLANKING THE SADF**

The Cuban tactic was to adopt a solely defensive posture at Cuito Cuanavale, aiming to block the South Africans there while at the same time eschewing the mounting of any offensive in that particular area. The FAR general staff viewed Cuito Cuanavale as an unsuitable theatre for deployment of the bulk of its forces. While they would defend the town, it would not be the site for the decisive strategic Cuban military operation. From their perspective, it did not make sense to massively engage the South Africans in an area where the SADF had already deployed the bulk of its best troops and equipment. Havana's objective was to execute a holding operation at Cuito Cuanavale, while striking the SADF where it was weakest.

Havana's plan envisioned drawing the South Africans into Cuito Cuanavale, so that it would become the SADF's major preoccupation. With the South Africans focused on the town, Castro and the FAR general staff envisioned that the successful defense would allow the Cubans and Angolans to concentrate forces to the southwest of Cuito Cuanavale, resulting in the outflanking of the SADF. By Havana's reckoning, this would place South African forces in an untenable military situation, thereby transforming the balance of forces and hence fundamentally altering the strategic situation. Aware that Pretoria had committed its most seasoned and experienced troops to the Cuito Cuanavale theatre of action, Havana now firmly grasped the corollary that, as a result, Namibia, which constituted South Africa's rear, had been left relatively undefended. In its drive to capture Cuito Cuanavale, Pretoria had left Namibia's defence in the hands of sparsely distributed and inexperienced troops, rendering it militarily vulnerable to Cuban and Angolan forces.

Castro stated that FAR planned to convert Cuito Cuanavale into a "deadly trap"



for the SADF.<sup>667</sup> With the SADF forces concentrating on the town, a drive from the west to the Namibian border would in-effect result in their encirclement. Castro frequently used the analogy of boxing to explain the Cuban strategy. In his address to the May 1988 ministerial meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement, he used that analogy to describe what had happened: “Cuito Cuanavale was the jab that kept the South Africans at bay and in place, while the outflanking manoeuvre was the right power and knock-out punch.”<sup>668</sup>

In early March, as it became apparent that the SADF would not succeed in their assault on the Tumpo Triangle, the implementation of the outflanking advance began. As noted in Chapter Two, with the South African siege of Cuito Cuanavale in progress, Havana assembled a considerable military force in southern Angola, considerably outstripping those at Cuito Cuanavale. Several Cuban sources emphasize the magnitude of the Cuban reinforcement. What stands out is not only the quantity of the weaponry and troops dispatched but also the quality. Havana decided to send not only the bulk of its armaments but also its most experienced and highly trained troops. For example, the elite 50th Brigade, normally charged with the defense of Havana, had been transferred to Angola.

Eventually, as noted in Chapter Two, the Cuban deployment rose to more than 50,000 troops, supported by more than 1,200 tanks.<sup>669</sup> The ground forces included a

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<sup>667</sup> See Castro, *Protagonistas de la Victoria*, 12; Fidel Castro’s comment in the *La respuesta...* documentary (FAR, 1989); *Case 1/1989*, 388; and Castro, *My Life*, 328

<sup>668</sup> See Fidel Castro’s speech in the *La respuesta...* documentary, *ibid.*; and Ronnie Kasrils, Turning point at Cuito Cuanavale, *The Sunday Independent*, 23 March 2008, 13

<sup>669</sup> Interview Division General Ulises Rosales del Toro, 500



Cuban artillery battalion<sup>670</sup> and an estimated 1,000 anti-aircraft weapons.<sup>671</sup> Cuban air power rose to 150 fighter aircraft and helicopters.<sup>672</sup> Jorge Risquet, the Cuban Communist Party's special attaché to Angola, stated that 998 tanks, 600 armoured transports, and 1,600 artillery guns, mortars and anti-aircraft weapons were deployed in southern Angola.<sup>673</sup> Havana had assembled in Angola what it considered to be "force necessary to strike a final blow to the South African forces."<sup>674</sup> The extent of the Cuban concentration of military power is further confirmed by sources from the former Soviet Union, which assert that by February 1989 Cuba had assembled an estimated 1,000 tanks, 200 armoured personnel carriers, 500 artillery guns and rocket-launchers, 70 anti-aircraft missile batteries and 44 fighter aircraft.<sup>675</sup> It is important to note that the Soviet figures refer to a period after the signing of the 22 December 1988 New York Accords, ending the military confrontation, leading to the gradual withdrawal of Cuban forces. It seems reasonable to assume that when hostilities were ongoing, the Cuban military strength would have been at least equal to the numbers mentioned in the Soviet documents.

On 6 March 1988, General Cintra Frias, who was in charge in Cuito Cuanavale, assumed command of all the Cuban/Angolan forces in southern Angola. Havana

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<sup>670</sup> Misión Cubana, 37

<sup>671</sup> Castro, *My Life*, 329

<sup>672</sup> Interview Division General Ulises Rosales del Toro, 500. Also, see Castro (1989), 404

<sup>673</sup> J. Risquet, La epopeya de Cuba, *Africa Negra* in Gleijeses, *Cuba y Africa*, 102

<sup>674</sup> Castro, *Protagonistas de la Victoria*, 12

<sup>675</sup> Shubin, *The USSR and Southern Africa*, 14



assigned him overall responsibility for the operation.<sup>676</sup> Cuban General Miguel Lorente took over command responsibilities at Cuito Cuanavale. On 10 March, under Cintra Frias's command, FAR and FAPLA forces began advancing toward the Namibian border.<sup>677</sup> The initial advance included four Cuban tank brigades (the 40th, 50th, 60th and 80th). They were accompanied by three Angolan brigades, which took up positions in the rear of the advance.<sup>678</sup>

By 20 March, the 40th, 50th and 80th Tank Brigades established a line in southern Angola from Humebe to Mucope to Cahama.<sup>679</sup> Eventually the 30th and 60th Tank Brigades, with the 60<sup>th</sup>, assumed a position in the town of Xangongo.<sup>680</sup> Three Angolan light infantry brigades provided additional support.<sup>681</sup> The tank complement accompanying these troops grew to at least six-hundred Cuban tanks.<sup>682</sup> While the SADF was executing its last attack on Cuito Cuanavale, Cuban forces continued driving southwards, taking up positions near the border. Eventually, the bulk of the Cuban troops in Angola — approximately 40,000 — spearheaded the buildup along the Angolan/Namibian frontier (see maps 4 & 5). Deployed with them were 30,000 Angolan and more than 3,000 SWAPO troops. Towards the end of May, Cintra Frias completed the deployment of the combined Cuban/Angolan/SWAPO forces along the border.

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<sup>676</sup> Blanch, *Cuba: pequeño gigante*, 73

<sup>677</sup> Gomez, *En El Sur*, 217

<sup>678</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>679</sup> Gomez, *En El Sur*, 224-225, 268; and Perales, *Victoria Al Sur*, 59-60 & 128

<sup>680</sup> Perales, *Victoria Al Sur*, 128 & 136

<sup>681</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>682</sup> See for example, Castro, *My Life*, 329; Blight, *Cuba on the Brink*, 245



On March 20, 1988, the Cubans started constructing a new airfield and base at Cahama, an Angolan southwestern town in Cunene Province located only 120km from Namibia.<sup>683</sup> Havana sent the necessary construction equipment, including trucks and bulldozers.<sup>684</sup> The airfield was completed in a few weeks and, by 3 June 1988 Cuban aircraft began operating from Cahama.<sup>685</sup> With the construction of the Cahama airstrip, the Cuban Air Force could now provide almost immediate support for the troops concentrated on the Namibian border. Major Emilo Palacio Blanco, a Cuban fighter pilot, underscored the advantage conveyed to Cuban pilots: “They can come anytime they are wanted.”<sup>686</sup> This stood in contrast to South African pilots.

### **THE NUCLEAR QUESTION**

One of the most controversial aspects of the conflict revolves around the South African nuclear weapons program. On several occasions, Castro has declared that the deployment of Cuban troops took place despite the Cuban government’s knowledge that South Africa possessed nuclear weapons, and the apprehension that Pretoria might even been prepared to use them to stave off defeat. Accordingly, Havana insisted that Cuban and Angolan divisions assume formations that ensured there was enough distance between them to guarantee that the entire military force would not be destroyed by a single South African nuclear strike.<sup>687</sup> Castro stated that they adopted “asymmetrical methods in keeping with

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<sup>683</sup> Interview with Lieutenant Colonel Roger Reyes Carrasco, in Canter *Operación Carlota*, 109-110

<sup>684</sup> *Case 1/1989*, 389

<sup>685</sup> Gomez, *En El Sur*, 343

<sup>686</sup> Perales, *Victoria Al Sur*, 153

<sup>687</sup> See, for example, Fidel Castro, “Mensaje para Nelson Mandela”, *Granma*, July 19, 2010, 1; Castro, “In Miami and Washington they are now discussing where, how and when Cuba will be attacked”, *Granma International*, May 2003; *Speech at the Cuban*



the fact that we were facing a South African army with nuclear weapons. We decided to form tactical groups consisting of no more than 1,000 men, heavily armed with tanks, armoured personnel carriers, artillery and anti-aircraft weapons...”<sup>688</sup>

This was demonstrated to have been neither an unnecessary nor outlandish precaution, when during a 24 March 1993 meeting of all three houses of the South African parliament, President F.W. de Klerk disclosed that Pretoria had constructed six atomic bombs (and had been working on a seventh) in the 1980s.<sup>689</sup> In its pursuit of nuclear weapons, apartheid South Africa had produced 440 kg of enriched uranium.<sup>690</sup> In his autobiography, De Klerk directly linked the decision to embark on a nuclear weapons program to regional developments, especially in Angola. He asserted that the decision to develop nuclear weapons reflected Pretoria’s siege mentality. The decision he wrote “was taken in 1974, against the backdrop of the Soviet expansionist threat in southern Africa, the deployment of Cuban forces in Angola from 1975 onwards and the

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*Solidarity Rally, Riverside Church, Harlem, New York, 8 September 2000* (Havana: Cuban Council of State, 2000); Castro (1989), 404; and F. Castro, *Speech at the Abyssinian Baptist Church, Harlem, New York, 22 October*. Video (New York: Nehesi Video Productions and Africans in the Americas Committee to Welcome Fidel Castro, 1995)

<sup>688</sup> Castro, *My Life*, 318

<sup>689</sup> See for example: Michael Hamlyn, “South Africa had nuclear bombs, admits de Klerk”, *The Times (London)* 25 March 1993; Peter Hounam and Steve McQuillan, *The Mini-Nuke Conspiracy: Mandela’s Nuclear Nightmare* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995); Bill Keller, “South Africa Says It Built 6 Atom Bombs but scrapped Them Before 1991”, *New York Times*, 25 March 1993

<sup>690</sup> J.W. de Villiers, Roger Jardine and Mitchell Reiss, Why South Africa Gave Up the Bomb, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, N<sup>o</sup>: 5 (1993), 102. See also Crawford, *The Domestic Consequences*, 13



knowledge that because of our international isolation, we could not be able to rely on outside assistance in the event of an attack.”<sup>691</sup>

During the development of its nuclear program, Pretoria not only sought assistance from but also discussed acquiring nuclear weapons from Israel. On March 31, 1975, Israel and South Africa signed a secret agreement on nuclear cooperation, specifically covering nuclear weapons.<sup>692</sup> For example, Pretoria considered not only buying the Israeli Jericho missile delivery system but also nuclear warheads with which to arm the missiles. In his memorandum on the meeting, then-SADF Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General R.F. Armstrong, outlined the SADF’s evaluation of the missile system:

In considering the merits of a weapon system such as the one being offered, certain assumptions have been made: a) That the missiles will be armed with nuclear warheads manufactured in RSA (Republic of South Africa) or acquired elsewhere.<sup>693</sup>

De Klerk stated that the nuclear program was conducted in utmost secrecy, “managed on a strictly need-to-know basis.”<sup>694</sup> While the subject of nuclear weapons may never have been discussed within the SSC or the cabinet, the SADF general staff (as would be expected) had extensive discussions on the deployment of these weapons. According to

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<sup>691</sup> De Klerk, *The Last Trek*, 273

<sup>692</sup> *Israel South Africa Agreement*, Pretoria, 31 March 1975. Declassified. Also, see Chris McGreal, “Revealed: how Israel offered to sell South Africa nuclear weapons”, *Guardian*, 24 May 2010. For a detailed examination see Sasha Polakow-Suransky, *The Unspoken Alliance: Israel’s Secret Relationship with Apartheid South Africa* (New York: Pantheon, 2010)

<sup>693</sup> Lieutenant General R. F. Armstrong, *The Jericho Weapons System*, 30 June 1975 [Declassified]; S. Polakow-Suransky (2010); and C. McGreal, “Revealed”.

<sup>694</sup> De Klerk, *The Last Trek*, 273.



Major General Thirion this discussion also occurred at the level of the SSC.<sup>695</sup> Along with Armstrong's memorandum, these discussions illustrate that, at the very least, the SADF took the nuclear option quite seriously. The memorandum indicates that the military discussed a missile delivery system. General Meiring corroborates this, noting: "We could have delivered them [nuclear weapons] by missiles."<sup>696</sup> Nevertheless, Thirion stated that while the missile delivery system was broached, it was never developed.<sup>697</sup> Missile delivery systems were not the only deployment options contemplated by the SADF. General Meiring emphasized that the general staff discussed other means: "But there were a lot of other means we could have used. We could have delivered them by aircraft. We made all the preparations."<sup>698</sup> Thirion stated that there were a variety of suggestions of how to deliver the bombs to the various states surrounding South Africa. In the case of Mozambique, the suggestion was made of placing a nuclear bomb on one of the trains returning to Maputo from South Africa.<sup>699</sup>

The discussion over delivery means was not some merely *pro forma* affair, in which all options — no matter how far-fetched — were set out. It was also part of a significant debate within the regime about whether nuclear weapons represented a viable and feasible line of defense. Thirion emphasized that in the SSC and the SADF there were persons who argued for "the use of nuclear weapons. There were people in the political and military circles, both in the SADF and the State Security Council, who

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<sup>695</sup> Interview with Major General Chris Thirion

<sup>696</sup> Hamann, *Day of the Generals*, 164

<sup>697</sup> Interview with Major General Chris Thirion

<sup>698</sup> Hamann, *Day of the Generals*; de Villiers, *Why South Africa*, 100

<sup>699</sup> Interview with Major General Chris Thirion



considered using nuclear weapons.”<sup>700</sup> He noted that the Foreign Minister Botha expressed no qualms about deploying, if deemed necessary, nuclear weapons in Angola: “Pik Botha said he had no problems dropping a nuclear device on Luanda.”<sup>701</sup>

The debate within the South African ruling circles established the circumstances under which Pretoria would countenance the use of nuclear weapons. Central to these deliberations was the military situation in Angola and the fear of internal revolution. According to Thirion, the use of nuclear weapons would have been “an absolute last resort.”<sup>702</sup> Nuclear weapons would only be used if Namibia was about to fall to a Cuban invasion and Black South Africans had launched a nationwide insurrection. SSC deliberations established that the conditions that justified the nuclear option were “if there were no buffer zone combined with a massive internal rebellion.”<sup>703</sup> However, in the end, Thirion pointed out that the SSC and SADF arrived at the consensus that the use of South Africa’s nuclear capability was never a viable option, due to the international condemnation and the crippling sanctions that would have ensued.

### **SADF VULNERABILITY**

The Cuban advance towards the Namibian border caught Pretoria completely by surprise. Colonel Breytenbach, who had excellent connections in the SADF upper echelons, stated that the Cuban drive to the border “caught the SADF’s top structure off-guard.”<sup>704</sup> With their attention focused solely on Cuito Cuanavale, the SADF high

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<sup>700</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>701</sup> Second Interview with Major General Chris Thirion, Pretoria, Pretoria, 4 August 2006

<sup>702</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>703</sup> Interview with Major General Chris Thirion

<sup>704</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 316



command never contemplated that Cuba and Angola could amass such a formidable military force in southwestern Angola and then execute a classic outflanking manoeuvre. An editorial in the *The [Johannesburg] Star* focusing on the Cuban/Angolan military buildup conveyed the SADF's seeming failure to consider that very possibility: "Last week military sources pooh-poohed reports of a massive Cuban push southwards, saying this was blatant propaganda...to create the impression that Cuba was a major force in the region."<sup>705</sup> Bernard Trainor, who also had cultivated a series of contacts in the SADF, reported in the *New York Times* that the military developments in southern Angola "came as a surprise to the South Africans."<sup>706</sup> Minutes of the 6 June 1988 SCC meeting confirm that the highest levels of the Botha regime were unprepared, initially attaching no significance to the Cuban military deployment. The participants speculated on the actual intentions of Havana, with Geldenhuys expressing indifference, stating the Cuban buildup was a development that the regime should "not be concerned about."<sup>707</sup>

Pretoria's incredulity soon turned into concern about Havana's intentions. SADF Chief of Staff Geldenhuys poignantly captured Pretoria's discomfiture in the face of this unexpected development, describing his own confusion as the Cuban/Angolan advance continued: "While this build-up was in progress, we naturally had to ask ourselves what the Cubans were up to."<sup>708</sup> A number of scenarios were discussed among the SADF general staff about Cuban plans, from a new offensive within Angola to an invasion of Namibia. However, confusion about the objectives of the Cuban advance to the border

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<sup>705</sup> D. Braun, "Malan threatens as Cubans advance", *The Star*. 16 May 1988

<sup>706</sup> B. E. Trainor, "South Africa's Strategy in Angola Falls Short, Enhancing Cubans' Role", *New York Times*, 12 July 1988

<sup>707</sup> SVR 11/88, 5, from MoD [Group 6]

<sup>708</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 239. See also Heitman, *War in Angola*, 297



still prevailed. Geldenhuys' own comments again underscored the confusion. Describing his own ruminations on the various scenarios presented to him in May 1988, he stated "All these thoughts kept crossing my mind. What is Castro up to?"<sup>709</sup> At the June 20 1988 SSC gathering, Botha speculated that the Cuban troop movement aimed at only strengthening the position of SWAPO forces.<sup>710</sup> He added that the "situation had to be watched closely."<sup>711</sup>

Events demonstrated that the SADF general staff had badly miscalculated in their drive to seize Cuito Cuanavale. Having overcommitted forces to the Cuito Cuanavale arena, the SADF failed to realize its rear (specifically the Ovamboland area in northern Namibia) would be vulnerable to a Cuban/Angolan riposte. Breytenbach stated that this danger should have readily been obvious, observing that the Cubans would have easily recognized this vulnerability and deployed their forces accordingly to take advantage of the situation.<sup>712</sup> He scathingly observed that due to "a lack of foresight the South Africans had allowed the bulk of their combat power to become tied down on the Cuito Cuanavale front."<sup>713</sup> Havana shared Breytenbach's judgment. Anatoly Adamishin, then the Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister, described a meeting with Fidel Castro in Havana, in which Castro castigated South African military planning: "Such fools, they [the South Africans] attacked us [at Cuito-Cuanavale] on 23 March; while from 18 March we were

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<sup>709</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 241

<sup>710</sup> SVR 12/88, p 5, from MoD [Group 6]

<sup>711</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

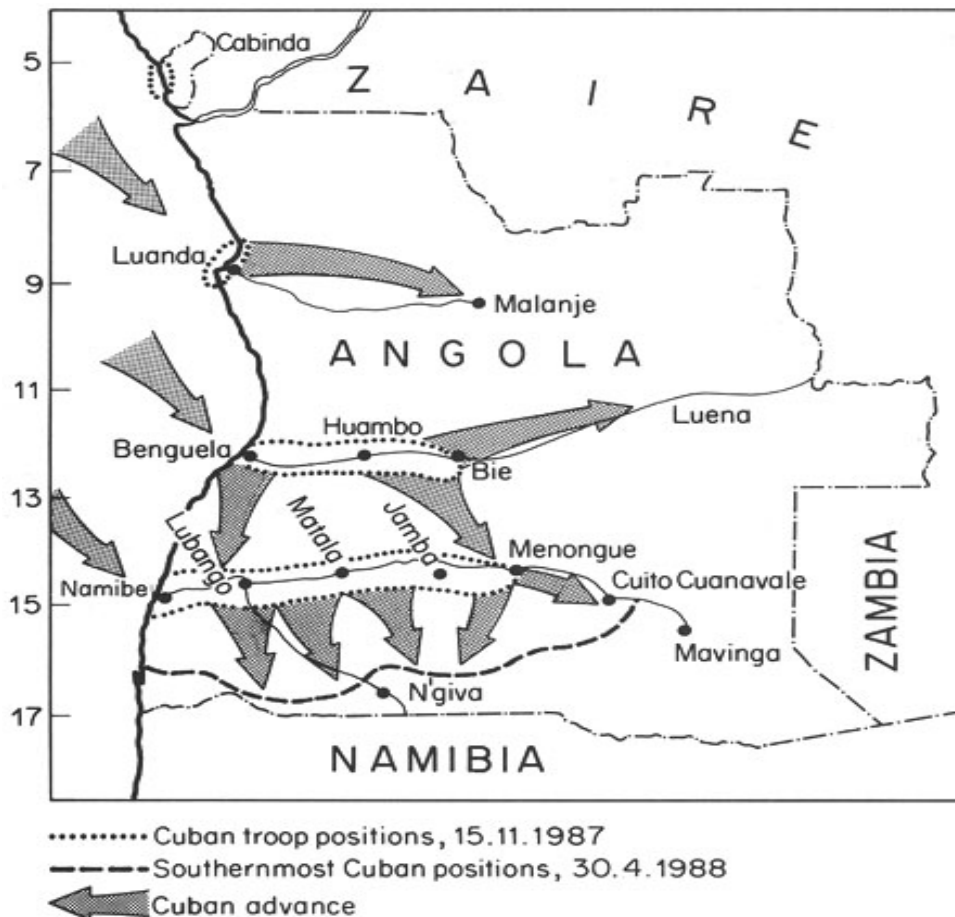
<sup>712</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 318

<sup>713</sup> *Ibid.*, 315



advancing south, getting into their rear.”<sup>714</sup> The massing of the Cuban troops had exposed the vulnerability of the South African troops in southern Angola and northern Namibia.

**Map 4: Cuban troop movements, 1987-88.**<sup>715</sup>



Pretoria’s confusion soon turned into alarm. As Havana’s intentions became clear, South African uncertainty gave way to fear about the SADF military positions in Angola and Namibia. From being on the offensive in the Cuito Cuanavale theatre, Pretoria was forced unto the defensive in southern Angola and Namibia. A number of key government officials made several sobering declarations about the deteriorating military

<sup>714</sup> A. Adamishin, *The White Sun of Angola* (Moscow, 2001), 110

<sup>715</sup> Source: <http://newleftreview.org/I/172/victoria-brittain-cuba-and-southern-africa>



situation and the growing threat to Namibia. Their high-level positions within the SSC and the SADF necessarily imbued these statements with significant gravity. Defence Minister Magnus Malan told the 9 May 1988 session of the South African Parliament about “the great danger a war escalating in this south western portion of our continent constitutes for us.”<sup>716</sup> He later added that: “Southern Africa is facing a military conflict of incalculable consequences.”<sup>717</sup>

*The Star* reflected this apprehension. On 16 May, two reports and a front-page editorial appeared in *The Star* about the advance of Cuban troops toward the Namibian-Angolan border. One covered Foreign Minister Roelof ‘Pik’ Botha’s declaration that there would be “no talks” if Cuban troops continued to advance.”<sup>718</sup> The other emphasized that “[t]he only possible obstacle to such talks will be an obstinate refusal by Angola to stop the current advance of Cuban and SWAPO into southern Angola.”<sup>719</sup> The editorial declared: “Hostilities in southern Angola and northern Namibia could escalate dramatically as South Africa squares up to face a possible new Cuban/SWAPO onslaught in Ovamboland.”<sup>720</sup> Magnus Malan warned that the continuing advance of Cuban and SWAPO towards Namibia posed the danger of a regional conflagration, which “could be the spark that starts the fire.”<sup>721</sup> The editorial ended by quoting

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<sup>716</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, 9 May 1988, 9210

<sup>717</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>718</sup> “No talks if troops advance”, *The Star*, 16 May 1988

<sup>719</sup> “More SA, Angola talks scheduled”, *The Star*, 16 May 1988

<sup>720</sup> D. Braun, “Malan threatens as Cubans advance”, *The Star*, 16 May 1988

<sup>721</sup> *Ibid.*



Pretoria's declaration that the continued Cuban/SWAPO advance would result in a "terrible battle."<sup>722</sup>

Geldenuys outlined Pretoria's fears: "Heavily armed Cuban and Swapo forces, integrated for the first time, have moved south within sixty kilometers of the Namibian border."<sup>723</sup> In another front-page story, this time in *The Star*, Geldenuys unambiguously stated that Namibia and the South African troops were in a "precarious" situation.<sup>724</sup> In the 6 June 1988 session of the South African parliament, Foreign Minister, Roelof 'Pik' Botha, expressed concern about the "Cuban presence, not only in numbers, but...spreading...out over a wider area in the southern part of Angola, approaching the border."<sup>725</sup> On 9 June 1988, *Die Burger* (Cape Town) carried Geldenuys' bluntest statement yet. In his evaluation, a fundamental and disadvantageous shift in the balance of military power had occurred: "The southward advance of very heavily armed Cuban troops, along a front 450 kilometers wide, has changed the status quo decidedly with serious military and political implications."<sup>726</sup>

These public declarations were not just fear-mongering gauged to buttress and engender continuing support for SADF military operations outside South Africa, but a serious expression of actual perceptions and evaluations about the deteriorating military situation. A palpable sense of anxiety and alarm gripped Pretoria. Statements and testimonies from SADF officers and rank-and-file soldiers underscored the seriousness

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<sup>722</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>723</sup> *The Namibian*, 27 May 1988 (untitled). See also *South Africa 1988-89: Official Yearbook of South Africa* (Pretoria, 1989), 214

<sup>724</sup> *The Star*, 27 May 1988 (untitled).

<sup>725</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, 6 June 1988, 13040

<sup>726</sup> *Die Burger* (Cape Town), 9 June 1988 (untitled)



of the situation. An unnamed senior South African officer articulated the sense of vulnerability that now beset the general staff: “This was more than we could handle. Had the Cubans attacked [Namibia] they would have over-run the place. We could not have stopped them.”<sup>727</sup>

In response, the regime began mobilization of South African troops by initiating a call-up of inactive and reserve troops. Botha stated that it was necessary to respond to the Cuban buildup.<sup>728</sup> In justifying the call-up, Geldenhuys gave a blunt appraisal of the military situation, which was a sharp departure from his earlier “not to be worried about” stance at the 6 June 1988 SSC meeting. Outlining the reinforcement of Cuban and SWAPO forces, which had now deployed across a 450-kilometer front, 20 - 30 kilometers north of the Namibian border, he announced “in response to the Cuban presence the SADF was calling up Citizen Force members.”<sup>729</sup> He went on to add that “there was no reason for panic and that “the SADF was capable of dealing with the situation...Suffice it to say that we have the forces to handle the situation, although the situation is serious - and more serious than it was - but we can handle it.”<sup>730</sup>

Apprehension was not only confined to the senior officers; it pervaded all levels of the SADF. Sergeant Jose Kupussu, who served in the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, stated that the white commanders of the battalion “were frightened that the Cubans would invade and take

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<sup>727</sup> L. Cliffe, *The Transition to Independence in Namibia* (London, 1994), 59; R. Jaster, *The 1988 Peace Accords and the Future of South-Western Africa, Adelphi Papers* 253:93 (1990), 93

<sup>728</sup> SVR 12/88, p 5, from MoD [Group 6]

<sup>729</sup> “Cubans, Swapo are reinforced”, *The Sowetan*, 10 June 1988

<sup>730</sup> *Ibid.*



Namibia, something they could do nothing about.”<sup>731</sup> SADF soldier Clive Holt captured the general nervousness among South African soldiers generated by the massing of Cuban/Angolan forces, noting that there was a general fear of “Castro’s objective of getting his conventional forces into SWA (*i.e.*, Namibia] and launching an assault on SA [South Africa].”<sup>732</sup> This fear was based on the belief that “if Fapla and the Cubans decided to advance into SWA, the SADF would have a tough time keeping them out.”<sup>733</sup> Taken together the newspaper accounts, contemporary and personal commentaries illustrate the sense of crisis that engulfed the Botha regime. The military reversals suffered by the SADF had created a direct threat to Namibia and, thus, by extension to the apartheid state, itself.

### **HAVANA’S INTENTIONS**

Was Havana preparing an invasion of Namibia? Pretoria’s anxiety was heightened by an exchange during the 3-4 May 1988 London round of talks that had been initiated in January 1988 between Angola, Cuba, South Africa and the United States on the situation in Namibia and Angola.<sup>734</sup> Pretoria wanted to ascertain Cuban intentions. The report presented to the 10 May 1988 SCC meeting stated that Cuba’s representatives made it clear that as Cuban forces massed in southern Angola, Havana “would also be crazy enough to enter Namibian territory.”<sup>735</sup> On 17 May, the *New York Times* reported that South African officials “asked Cuban officials earlier this month [May] to guarantee that

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<sup>731</sup> Interview with Jose Kupussu

<sup>732</sup> Holt, *At Thy Call*, 133

<sup>733</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>734</sup> The negotiation process is addressed in Chapter Five

<sup>735</sup> SVR 9/88, p 6, from MoD [Group 6]



the Cuban troops would not cross the border. The Cubans refused.”<sup>736</sup> According to Geldenhuys, Cuban representative General Ulises Rosales del Toro called him aside to say that Havana had assembled a significant concentration of their military might and that “[n]ot even the Namibian border would stop them.”<sup>737</sup> Geldenhuys interpreted this as a threat: if Pretoria did not accede to Havana’s demands then it would face “a big war - a war that will destroy you.”<sup>738</sup> He wondered: was “Rosales serious? Would they invade South West Africa? Did Fidel Castro aim to crush the South African Forces decisively and so bring an end to the war? Was it blackmail?”<sup>739</sup>

Crocker corroborated the tenor of the meeting between Geldenhuys and Rosales del Toro.<sup>740</sup> However, Crocker was more than a mere witness to this exchange. The Botha regime was not the only one preoccupied by the question of whether Cuba intended to enter Namibia. As the Cuban/Angolan military buildup continued, the Reagan administration also became very concerned about the Cuban deployment in southern Angola and wanted to ascertain Havana’s intentions. As an intimate relationship existed between the Botha Regime and the Reagan administration, Maj. Gen. Thirion (as Deputy-Director of SADF Intelligence) and Breytenbach (through his contacts in the SADF’s higher echelons) would have been privy to U.S. anxieties regarding Angola. Both noted Washington’s growing alarm. Colonel Breytenbach stated that the U.S. was greatly disturbed by Cuban military moves, noting that “[s]hock waves

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<sup>736</sup> J. Brooke, Angolan “Affirms Wider Cuban Role”, *New York Times*, 17 May 1988

<sup>737</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General’s Story*, 4

<sup>738</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>739</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>740</sup> Crocker, *High Noon In Southern Africa*, 399



were felt in Washington.”<sup>741</sup> According to Breytenbach, Havana’s significant role led the Reagan administration to conclude that communism posed a “real threat of expansionism in the region.”<sup>742</sup> Thirion observed that as the battle of Cuito Cuanavale intensified and the Cubans massed in southern Angola “the Americans realized the temperature was going up.”<sup>743</sup>

We do not have to rely solely on these South African statements to ascertain Washington’s apprehensions. In his memoir, Crocker presented an equivocal evaluation of the military situation, writing that while the military activity “seemed...ominous” it was also “ambiguous,” as the Cubans did not represent a serious threat to the SADF forces in Namibia.<sup>744</sup> Nonetheless, two declassified documents indicate that Crocker was being disingenuous. A 12 May 1988 intelligence report sent to U.S. Secretary of State, George Shultz underscored that U.S. analysts considered that South Africa faced a serious dilemma, entailing serious dangers:

At any other time Pretoria would have regarded the Cuban move as a provocation, requiring a swift and strong response. But the Cubans moved with such dispatch and on such a scale that an immediate South African military response would have involved serious risks.<sup>745</sup>

This analysis was supported by the 17-page report of the United States Defence Intelligence Agency of 12 December 1988, which challenges Crocker’s “ambiguous

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<sup>741</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 317

<sup>742</sup> *Ibid.*, 316

<sup>743</sup> Interview with Major General Chris Thirion

<sup>744</sup> Crocker, *High Noon In Southern Africa*, 371

<sup>745</sup> Abramowitz, *Bureau of Intelligence and Research, United States Department of State to Secretary of State*, 12 May 1988, 1-2, Freedom of Information Act. Source: National Security Archives, Georgetown University. See Gleijeses, *La causa mas bonita*, 64-65



assessment.” It unequivocally acknowledged that Cuban forces had altered the military balance of power to the disadvantage of South Africa.<sup>746</sup> It thus appears incongruous that the position of Crocker (the chief U.S. diplomat in Africa) on the import of the Cuban military buildup should not be reflected in a secret and only recently declassified U.S. government document. The disagreement between Crocker’s memoir and this document could have reflected either a difference opinion within the U.S. government, or perhaps an effort by Crocker to minimize the impact of the unexpected Cuban actions. Just as the U.S. Department of State and intelligence services had been caught off-guard by the Cuban deployment in 1975, it is quite possible that Crocker did not want to publicly acknowledge that they had once again been taken by surprise by Havana.

Nevertheless, Crocker was apparently concerned enough by Cuban actions to voice his concerns to both the Soviet and Cuban representatives separately and at different times. Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Adamishin wrote that, during an 18-19 May 1988 meeting in Lisbon, Crocker said that he was worried by the Cuban drive to the Angolan/Namibian border. Crocker stated the Cuban actions constituted a “dangerous game” that had to be ended.<sup>747</sup> Crocker noted that during the 24-26 June 1988 Cairo round of negotiations, he asked Jorge Risquet (Cuba’s Chief negotiator) what were “Cuba’s military intentions at the Namibian border.”<sup>748</sup> In short, would they cross it or not? Crocker noted that Risquet’s reaction was to smile “menacingly,” remarking “that he could offer [Crocker] ‘no tylenol’.”<sup>749</sup> While confirming this exchange, Risquet

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<sup>746</sup> USDIA *Lessons Learned* (1988), 13 & 16

<sup>747</sup> Adamishin, *The White Sun*, 117

<sup>748</sup> Crocker, *High Noon In Southern Africa*, 399

<sup>749</sup> *Ibid.*, 371



provided a more detailed and nuanced account, disputing the menacing tone Crocker had ascribed. Risquet stated he had refused to confirm one way or the other Cuba's intentions, placing his "non-answer" within the context of the ongoing negotiations. According to Risquet, Crocker inquired: "Does Cuba intend to stop its advance at the border between Namibia and Angola?" Risquet replied:

I cannot respond to this. I cannot give you a meprobamto [a Cuban painkiller], neither to you nor to the South Africans. I have not said that that we are not going to stop nor we are going to stop. Understand me well, I am not threatening. If I told you that we are not going to stop, I would be hurling a threat, If I told you that we are going to stop, I would be giving a meprobamato, a Tylenol, and I do not want to threaten neither do I want to soothe you...What I said was that only the agreements [about Namibian independence] can provide guarantees.<sup>750</sup>

While, the Cubans believed that they had assembled enough military force to drive the SADF out of Namibia, a drive into Namibia was rejected as a course of action. Vic Allen, former professor at Leeds University and official historian for the National Union of Mineworkers, reported that in a 27 December 1988 meeting in Havana (which he attended), Fidel Castro stated that after the battle for Cuito Cuanavale the Cuban armed forces "could have rolled the South Africans forces back over their own borders and into their own territory and...for a brief moment they thought of doing just that."<sup>751</sup> Nevertheless, while the Castro government wished to keep the threat of a Cuban drive into Namibia alive in the minds of Pretoria and Washington, it decided that Cuban forces were not going to enter Namibia.

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<sup>750</sup> Quoted in P. Gleijeses, *La causa mas bonita: Cuba y Africa, 1975-1988*, in Gleijeses *et al.* (eds.), (2007), 64-65; Piero Gleijeses, *Misiones en Conflicto: La Habana, Washington y Africa, 1959-1976* (La Habana, 2002), 457-458

<sup>751</sup> V. Allen, *My Secret Mission to meet Fidel*, *CubaSí* (London, 2003), 16-17



**First**, Havana viewed military action as a means to an end, a way by which to create conditions on the ground that would dictate the direction and terms of negotiations. The Cuban government calculated that the change in the balance of forces was sufficient to guarantee that the outcome of the negotiating process would be favourable for Namibian independence. On several occasions during 1988, Castro outlined this approach. He argued that while the South Africans had been repelled at Cuito Cuanavale, and a massive Cuba force had gathered on the Namibian frontier, Havana was not interested in a major military clash, adding that it wanted the conflict resolved at the negotiation table. While not categorically ruling out a Cuban push into Namibia, Castro stressed Cuba's desire to resolve the conflict diplomatically. After describing in his address to the May 1988 ministerial meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement how the SADF had been defeated at Cuito Cuanavale, Castro said: "But we are not interested in a military victory, in military glory. We want these problems resolved once and for all at the negotiating table."<sup>752</sup> He, also, argued that the resolution of the conflict in Angola and the attainment of Namibian independence would have repercussions inside South Africa, asserting: "I think we will then stand on the threshold of the end of apartheid."<sup>753</sup> Angolan President Eduardo Dos Santos, who was in constant contact and consultation with Havana, confirmed the Cuban decision not to attack the SADF inside Namibia, saying in a May 1988 interview that while "Cuban forces are indeed moving south... there is no intention of invading Namibia."<sup>754</sup>

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<sup>752</sup> See F. Castro's speech in the *La repuesta...* documentary (FAR, 1989)

<sup>753</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>754</sup> J. Phillips, "The view from Angola", *The Weekly Mail*, 20 – 26 May 1988



**Second,** Havana and Moscow were worried that an advance into Namibia might lead to U.S. intervention. Adamishin noted that this was the jointly agreed stance of Havana and Moscow: “We had a secret understanding with the Cubans that they would not cross the border with Namibia. But – it was also agreed upon – there was not reason to declare it publicly.”<sup>755</sup> He stated that the Soviet advocacy of this approach was part of Moscow’s policy of supporting the Cuban military strategy in southern Angola, while ensuring that an unmanageable regional conflagration did not break out. Moscow endeavoured “not to hamper it [Cuba’s military strategy], even help it in every possible way, but to see to it that it does not go out of control.”<sup>756</sup>

**Third,** Cuba wanted to minimize casualties. Castro and other Cuba officers often mentioned that one of the FAR principles was to limit the deaths and injury rates. Castro stated that the aim was “to obtain the basic objectives without sacrificing thousands of lives. If we had to wage big battles, we’d fight, because there was no alternative, but the idea was to achieve the goals with a minimum of casualties...”<sup>757</sup> Many of the Cuban memoirs emphasize that at many points in the planning of every military operation great efforts were made to avoid Cuban and Angolan casualties.

**Fourth,** as previously noted, Havana knew that South Africa possessed nuclear weapons and was seriously concerned that Pretoria might even be prepared to use them to stave off defeat. However, until the negotiating process concluded with the signing of the 22 December 1988 New York Accords, Havana never denied or confirmed whether its forces would advance into Namibia. Indeed, from the beginning of the advance to the

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<sup>755</sup> Adamishin, *The White Sun*, 110

<sup>756</sup> *Ibid.*, 117

<sup>757</sup> *Case 1*, 1989, 393



border in March 1988 to the conclusion of the negotiation process in December 1988, the very real possibility - the threat - of a Cuban intervention into Namibia hung over Pretoria.

### **THE CALUEQUE CLASH**

In response to the threat of a major Cuban offensive, the SADF had begun withdrawing its forces from around Cuito Cuanavale to more southerly positions in Angola, regrouping in Cunene province. The withdrawal was an attempt to redress the military balance, by not only extricating the troops at Cuito Cuanavale but also redeploying them to face the perceived Cuban threat. Robert Ross stated that the SADF had been outflanked, and “forced to retreat to Cunene, leaving behind all its equipment,” asserting that “annihilation was a real possibility” confronting the SADF.<sup>758</sup>

Hyperbole and exaggeration aside, out-manoeuvred strategically, the SADF now faced a serious military situation. In response, the SADF made preparations for a major military clash in northern Namibia, with Pretoria initiating the callup of 14,000 Citizen Force reserves for deployment in Namibia.<sup>759</sup> An article in *The Economist* observed that South Africa had “called up some reserve soldiers” to deal with the new military situation.<sup>760</sup> On 8 June, Geldenhuys formally announced the mobilization.<sup>761</sup> Geldenhuys stated that aim the activation was “to provide for the necessary force levels in the event of an attack into South West Africa, but also it was also meant to convey a

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<sup>758</sup> R. Ross, *A Concise History of South Africa* (Cambridge, 2008), 193

<sup>759</sup> Hamann, *Day of the Generals*, 99

<sup>760</sup> “Under new management: Angola”, *The Economist*, 2 July 1988

<sup>761</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 245



message to the Cubans of what they would expect if indeed it should happen.”<sup>762</sup> Botha told him that if the Cubans entered Namibia, the SADF had to launch a massive retaliatory strike: “If they put one foot across the border hit them with everything you’ve got. If that happens then the Ovamboland becomes the battlefield.”<sup>763</sup> Nevertheless, despite the developments in Angola, the Botha regime seemed unwilling to publicly concede that any fundamental transformation had occurred in the regional balance of power. Foreign Minister Botha reflected this inability to accept the change by telling the South African parliament on 9 June: “South Africa is the powerhouse not only of Africa, but in particular of the southern African region.”<sup>764</sup>

To redress the military situation and dissuade the Cubans from entering Namibia, Pretoria decided to attack the Cuban forces. Havana was aware that the SADF was preparing a military operation. However, while Havana had intelligence that the SADF was planning a major attack, it did not know where and when it would occur. Crocker was aware that the Cubans were concerned that the South Africans “would launch a surprise attack on their forces...”<sup>765</sup> On 7 June, Castro sent a cable to General Cintra Frias outlining the danger of a SADF strike and the defensive measures that should be taken:

News of possible South Africa surprise air raid against Cuban-Angolan forces should not be underestimated for it has a certain logic. Our troops should take strict security measure in their shelters; anti-aircraft equipment should be on full alert, especially at dawn, dusk and all other hours of the day; possible defence action by our airforce using planes stationed in Cahama should be considered; plans should be made for a counterattack...<sup>766</sup>

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<sup>762</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>763</sup> Hamann, *Day of the Generals*, 99; Geldenhuys, *A General’s Story*, 240

<sup>764</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, 6 June 1988, 3038

<sup>765</sup> Crocker, *High Noon In Southern Africa*, 372

<sup>766</sup> *Case 1*, 1989, 390



Castro presciently instructed: “Tchipa personnel should be kept alert and underground; planned movements should make allowances for these risks. Decisive moments may be at hand.”<sup>767</sup> Castro also sent a letter that day to Angolan President José Eduardo dos Santos echoing the issues and information raised in the cable on the anticipated South African attack:

As you know, we have received intelligence reports saying that the South Africans are planning a large-scale surprise air raid on the Angolan-Cuban troop grouping in southern Angola. There is a certain logic to this report if we consider the desperate position of the South Africans as a result of the defeats and failures they have suffered in the military and diplomatic fields. They may be tempted to try a sudden blow to change the balance of forces using planes to incur the least possible number of white casualties.<sup>768</sup>

Deployed at Tchipa - a town 55 km from the border - was the bulk of the 80th Tank Brigade, a missile battery, an artillery regiment and the 2nd Angolan Infantry Brigade.<sup>769</sup> In response, the SADF had, under the supervision of Brig. Gen. Chris Serfontein, moved reinforcements to the border. The specific focus was the area around Tchipa. Pretoria viewed the Cuban deployment at Tchipa as a direct threat to the Calueque dam and the Ruacana hydroelectric complex. Also, the size of the forces arrayed at Tchipa indicated to some SADF officers that preparations were underway for a “possible invasion” of Namibia.<sup>770</sup> To meet this threat, reinforcements, under the command of Colonel Michau, were dispatched to Tchipa. Joining the 61st Mechanized, the 4th South African Infantry and the 32nd Battalion were two battalions of tanks and armoured cars, an artillery

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<sup>767</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>768</sup> *Case 1*, 1989, 390

<sup>769</sup> Perales, *Victoria Al Sur*, 132; Gomez, *En El Sur*, 304

<sup>770</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 318



brigade. The artillery deployed included a battery of G5 155-mm guns, supported by G2 guns.<sup>771</sup>

During April and May several skirmishes occurred in the Tchipa area.<sup>772</sup> On 31 May and 1 June the SADF attacked Tchipa by air, but caused little damage.<sup>773</sup> On 14 June two South African planes tried to launch a strike on the 60th tank brigade but were driven away by two MiG-23s from Cahama.<sup>774</sup> Towards the end of June the engagements with the South Africans increased in intensity. From 20 to 25 June Cuban artillery in Tchipa and South African artillery based on the Namibian border exchanged fire. For example, on June 20th, the SADF launched a 20-minute barrage from positions 16 km from Tchipa. The Cubans replied with an artillery and air attack against these South African forces.<sup>775</sup> Cuban and South African ground forces also clashed during this period in the Tchipa area. An SADF armoured column ambushed a joint Cuban-SWAPO patrol. Two Cubans were killed. However, the South Africans came under attack by MiG-23s and were forced to withdraw.<sup>776</sup> On 24 June, the South African aircraft tried to stage another air attack but were shot down by anti-aircraft missiles. Major Daniel Elias Rodriguez described what happened:

At 5:20 in the evening the chief of the Volga group [the designation of an antiaircraft battery] called out: "An enemy target has appeared..." Raise the alarm for the Cuban tank brigade and the Angolan infantry brigades

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<sup>771</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>772</sup> Gomez, *En El Sur*, 279-338; Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 319-322

<sup>773</sup> Perales, *Victoria Al Sur*, 133

<sup>774</sup> Gomez, *En El Sur*, 362

<sup>775</sup> *Ibid.*, 368-369

<sup>776</sup> Blanch, *Cuba: pequeño gigante*, 78-79; Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 322



and make sure the information makes it to Cahama... Jesus! There are two planes...Fire!<sup>777</sup>

On 26 June, the SADF launched a major attack. At 18:00 [6:00 p.m.], the South Africans unleashed a massive artillery assault with its G-5 guns, showering the town with hundreds of 127-mm shells.<sup>778</sup> Castro stated that 200 shells fell.<sup>779</sup> The attack was launched just after the Cubans had concluded a game of baseball.<sup>780</sup> Breytenbach alleged that the “devastation was phenomenal,” resulting in the deaths of 500-600 Cubans, Angolans and SWAPO personnel.<sup>781</sup> The clash soon turned into an artillery duel between Cuban and South African artillery.

Havana demanded an immediate response, ordering a Cuban air strike against the dam in the town of Calueque located on the Cunene River in Cunene province. In a cable to General Cintra Frias, Castro stated: “We must respond to today’s artillery attack against Tchipa. We feel the first step must be a strong air attack against South African camps, military installations and personnel on Calueque and the surrounding area.”<sup>782</sup> Havana designated Calueque a strategic target because the dam was a critical water source for the South Africans in Namibia. It was the principal water supply for much of Ovamboland and, also, provided water to the important Ruacana hydroelectric power station, located 20 km away from Calueque within Namibia. Geldenhuys underscored the importance of the dam, noting that South Africa had been “pumping water

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<sup>777</sup> Gomez, *En El Sur*, 377-379

<sup>778</sup> Perales, *Victoria Al Sur*, 134

<sup>779</sup> *Case 1*, 1989, 391

<sup>780</sup> Perales, *Victoria Al Sur*, 135

<sup>781</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 322

<sup>782</sup> *Case 1*, 1989, 391



uninterruptedly from the Cunene [river] at Calueque. There was no water in Ovambo. It was important to keep the water flowing for as long as possible.”<sup>783</sup>

Castro was also worried about a follow-up ground attack on Tchipa, instructing that troops be put “on alert for any attack by land against Tchipa.”<sup>784</sup> These instructions proved, once again, to be serendipitous. On 27 June the Cubans ambushed an SADF column of military vehicles near Tchipa. Three of the five trucks in the column were destroyed, with the South Africans abandoning a fourth. One truck managed to escape, leaving behind 20-30 dead and a number of abandoned armoured vehicles. Documents discovered in the vehicles indicated that many of the troops killed were from the 32nd “Buffalo” Battalion.<sup>785</sup> While Havana stated that only two Cubans were killed, the SADF claimed that the Cuban and Angolan death toll was at least 200.<sup>786</sup> In his memoirs, Geldenhuys claimed the death toll was 302.<sup>787</sup> Breytenbach put the death toll lower at 60 Cubans, with 2 tanks, 2 anti-aircraft guns and a number of vehicles destroyed.<sup>788</sup>

In South African accounts, the SADF emerged victorious. Both Geldenhuys and Breytenbach assert that the Cubans were forced into retreat, at which point the SADF forces, under the Command of Commandant Muller, withdrew.<sup>789</sup> However, given that

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<sup>783</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 243

<sup>784</sup> *Case 1*, 1989, 391

<sup>785</sup> Blanch, *Cuba: pequeño gigante*, 79. See also Gomez, *En El Sur*, 394

<sup>786</sup> “Peace In Balance: Cuba forces launch attack”, *The Sowetan*, 30 June 1988; Blanch, *Cuba: pequeño gigante*, 78-79

<sup>787</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 248

<sup>788</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 324

<sup>789</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 248; Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 323; Heitman (1990), 305-306



Havana anticipated an attack and had taken the necessary defensive measures, it seems unlikely that they would have sustained such a high casualty rate, either in the 26 June artillery barrage against Tchipa or in the clash of ground forces. Moreover, if the SADF had been so successful in their attack, having inflicted so much damage, then it seems logical to expect that they would have pressed home their advantage and pursued the Cubans, seeking deliver a devastating blow.

Also, on 27 June, in retaliation for the artillery barrage against Tchipa, the Cubans launched the planned air strike against South African positions at Calueque. On 22 June, a shipment of more advanced MiG-23s — MiG-23 BNs — arrived had arrived from Cuba. They could carry more and heavier payloads and were equipped with more accurate targeting instrumentation.<sup>790</sup> At 12:30 p.m, six MiG-23s from Lubango, and two from Cahama took off with the mission of bombing the Calueque Dam. The eight aircraft separated into two groups. To avoid detection by South African radar, Maj. Jorge Rodriguez Marquetti, one of the pilots, said the MiG-23s flew less than 30 meters above tree level.<sup>791</sup> Ten tons of bombs were dropped, specifically designed for demolition and fragmentation.<sup>792</sup> At 13:00 [1:00 p.m.], the first squadron destroyed the section of the bridge next to the dam's floodgates, the SADF engine room and the crane. This was followed by the second squadron's attack, which inflicted more damage.<sup>793</sup> The strike

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<sup>790</sup> Gomez, *En El Sur*, 371-372

<sup>791</sup> *Ibid.*, 402

<sup>792</sup> *Ibid.*, 399

<sup>793</sup> Blanch, *Cuba: pequeño gigante*, 80



had succeeded in its objective of knocking the dam out of action. SADF Colonel Dick Lord described the Cuban attack as “very well planned.”<sup>794</sup>

The SADF claimed that 12 of its soldiers were killed by the air strike. Geldenhuys asserted that an off-target bomb exploded between two SADF vehicles, killing 11 soldiers.<sup>795</sup> Breytenbach wrote that the soldiers had been hit by a “stray bomb” while they were brewing tea.<sup>796</sup> Luanda contradicted the SADF account, stating that 26 SADF soldiers were killed.<sup>797</sup> Cuban sources also argue for a higher South African loss of life than admitted by Pretoria. Lieutenant -Colonel Jimenez Gomez stated that later that week, a squadron of Cuban T-62 tanks arrived at Calueque, discovering scattered military supplies and widespread debris from buildings and machines, as well as, “blood and pieces of flesh, fragments of uniforms in trees.”<sup>798</sup> The Cubans estimated that at least 50 South Africans were killed and 100 wounded, basing these figures on the carnage found.<sup>799</sup>

## **UNDERSCORING SADF VULNERABILITY**

South Africa lost control of Calueque. Defence Minister Malan downplayed the significance of the air raid, pointedly denying that South Africa had suffered a military *débâcle*, declaring that the SADF did not have “a bloody nose.”<sup>800</sup> Instead, he declared

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<sup>794</sup> Quoted in Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 316

<sup>795</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 248

<sup>796</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 324

<sup>797</sup> “Peace In Balance: Cuba forces launch attack”, *The Sowetan*, 30 June 1988

<sup>798</sup> Gomez, *En El Sur*, 81

<sup>799</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>800</sup> A. Harber and S. Johnson, “Angolan Dam Attack: Has SA lost air superiority?” *The Weekly Mail*, 1-7 July 1988



the SADF was ready to be thrown at Cuban forces if hostilities expanded.<sup>801</sup> Nevertheless, the “heavy loss of life...was disasterous.”<sup>802</sup> The engagement was seen as a crucial event by some South African commentators. They portrayed it as underlining the reversal of South African military fortunes, with the SADF now placed in a clearly disadvantageous position. For example, a front-page story in *The Weekly Mail* quoted a news release from the South African Conservative Party, which described the clash as a “crushing humiliation” for the SADF.<sup>803</sup> *The Weekly Mail* argued that “the inescapable impression is of the Angolans showing unprecedented confidence and the South Africans looking defensive.”<sup>804</sup> While, noting Malan’s denial of an SADF “bloody nose,” it asserted that “recent developments point to an important change in the conflict in Angola.”<sup>805</sup>

In the same issue, Peter Vale argued that South Africa was “in a war which more closely resembles the trenches of the Somme than more familiar counter-insurgency war of modern times.”<sup>806</sup> These various contemporary newspaper accounts demonstrate the understanding and perception that events had abruptly shifted against South Africa was neither isolated nor anomalous. While not as hyperbolic as Vale, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency echoed the analysis that Calueque underscored the SADF’s

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<sup>801</sup> “Angola: War Drums”, *The Sowetan*, 30 June 1988

<sup>802</sup> George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, p 245

<sup>803</sup> Harber and Johnson, “Angolan Dam Attack”

<sup>804</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>805</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>806</sup> P. Vale, “The 13 unlucky years between the two battles of Calueque”, *The Weekly Mail*, 1-7 July 1988



vulnerability and loss of military dominance in the region. In a 29 June 1988 report it argued:

The successful way with which Cuba has utilized its air force and the apparent weakness of the anti-aircraft defenses of Pretoria...providing the proof of the dilemma Pretoria has confronting the Cuban challenge. The South African Armed forces can strike hard blows to individual Cuban-Angolan units, but Cuba has the advantage, especially in antiaircraft defense and the number of airplanes and troops.<sup>807</sup>

The loss of military dominance was graphically reflected in the arena of air power. One of the most critical developments in the conflict was the deployment of Cuban military aircraft and elite pilots. Cuban air power increased to an estimated 150 aircraft.<sup>808</sup> Out of these, 126 were fighters and fighter-bombers: 51 MiG-23s and 75 MiG-21s. Arrayed against the Cubans, the South Africans had an estimated 100 Mirages.<sup>809</sup> However, almost half of the South African fleet was in need of repair and, therefore, not air-worthy.<sup>810</sup> Many of the Cuban planes almost never made it to Angola. The *Las Coloradas*, the Cuban ship on which a considerable number were being transported, lost power before it reached port. As it floundered, the entire ship, along with its cargo, was in danger of sinking. Eventually, partial power was restored and the ship was towed into Luanda.<sup>811</sup> According to a Cuban officer, that night the aircraft were unloaded and pulled

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<sup>807</sup> South Africa-Angola-Cuba, Central Intelligence Agency, 29 June 1988, quoted in P. Gleijeses, *La causa mas bonita: Cuba y Africa, 1975-1988*, 65-66

<sup>808</sup> Interview with Division General Ulises Rosales, 500

<sup>809</sup> Perales, *Victoria Al Sur*, 150

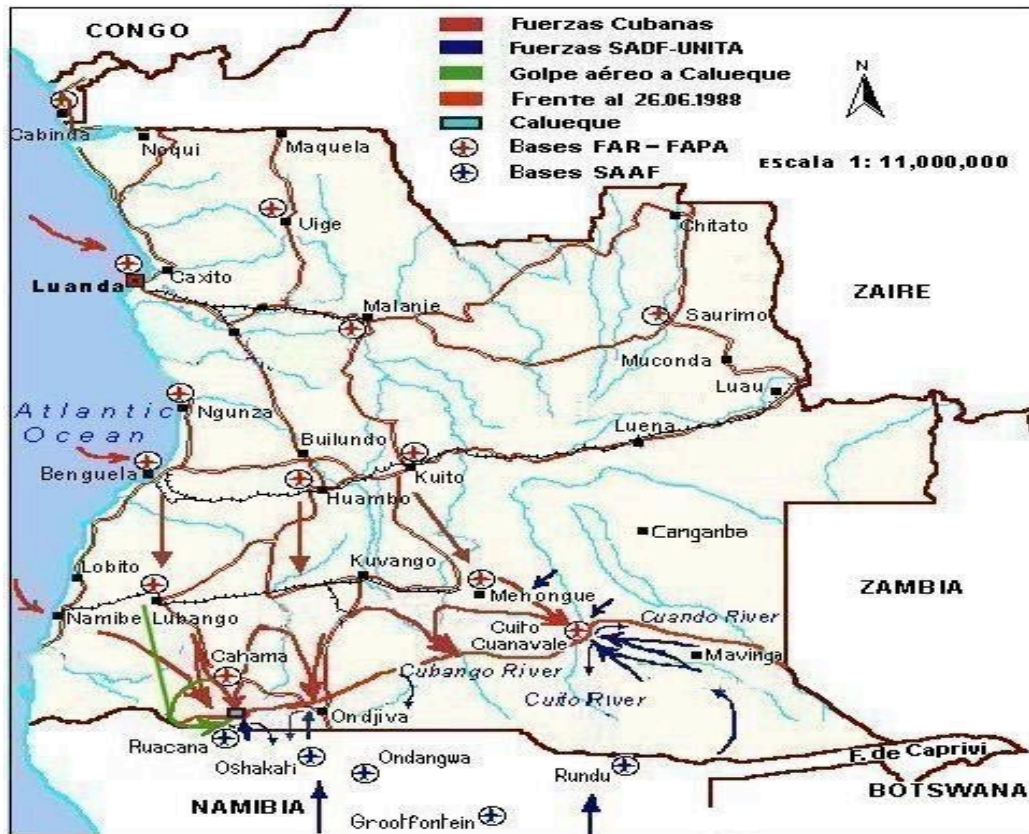
<sup>810</sup> Coker, *South Africa's Security*, (1987). See Crawford, *The Domestic Consequences*, 25

<sup>811</sup> Interview with Brigadier General Orlando Almaguel Vidal, 212



through the streets of Luanda by tractors to the airport, from which they were then flown to Menogue.<sup>812</sup>

**Map 5: Red arrows – FAR; Dark Blue- SADF-UNITA; Green- Cuban air-attack on Calueque; Orange- Frontlines, June 1988; Light-blue- Calueque.**<sup>813</sup>



Of particular significance were the MiG-23s. At the time, the MiG-21 was the most advanced aircraft in the Angolan Air Force. The arrival of the Cuban MiG-23s significantly augmented the air power arrayed against the SADF, as they were superior to the Mirages, which were the most advanced warplanes in the South African Air Force. This decisively altered the balance of power in the struggle for air supremacy, forcing South African pilots to contend with circumstances that had now become unfavourable to them. This transformation did not go unnoticed by South African soldiers on the

<sup>812</sup> Interview with Cuban Officer, anonymity retained

<sup>813</sup> Source: [http://resistir.info/cuba/cuito\\_cuanavale.html](http://resistir.info/cuba/cuito_cuanavale.html)



ground. Hein Groenewald said that it was clear that the “Cubans now had superiority in aircraft, tanks and other advanced weaponry.”<sup>814</sup> Groenewald noted that this change in the balance of air power was reflected in the attitudes of South African pilots as it became clear during the struggle for Cuito Cuanavale and afterwards that they respected “Cuban air power and Cuban pilots.”<sup>815</sup>

South African aircraft no longer took to the skies as frequently or in the same numbers. This reflected the trepidation of confronting opponents who outmatched anything in the SAAF. Cuban pilot Lieutenant Colonel Eduardo Saria Gonzalez summed up this transformation:

Up to the first half of 1987, we were even with the South Africans in air power. But during the battle for Cuito Cuanavale and after, we had more planes and the better trained pilots. We gained a distinct advantage. The South Africans were good pilots. They were not cowards. We just beat them on the battlefield.<sup>816</sup>

The number of South African aircraft and pilots shot down remains a controversial issue. Anecdotal evidence and media reports indicate greater losses than Pretoria admitted. The Cubans, for example, asserted a F-1 Mirage piloted by Maj. Edward R. Every was shot down on 20 February 1988 by a combination of artillery fire and an anti-aircraft missile.<sup>817</sup> The *South African Air Force Roll of Honour*, which lists alphabetically its members who died while in active service from May 1946 to April 1994, confirms that Major Edward R. Every died on 21 February 1988.<sup>818</sup> The discrepancy between the

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<sup>814</sup> Interview with Hein Groenewald

<sup>815</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>816</sup> Interview with Eduardo Gonzalez Saria

<sup>817</sup> Blanch, *Cuba: pequeño gigante*, 74

<sup>818</sup> *South African Air Force Roll of Honour* (Pretoria, unknown publication date), 4



Cuban date of his shooting-down and the South African date of his death is perhaps due to his survival of the initial shooting-down, ultimately succumbing to his injuries. Also, as already mentioned, on 24 June the Cubans reported shooting down two South African aircraft; however, no deaths are listed for 24 June, but the pilots may have ejected and survived. While the *Roll of Honour* only lists names and dates of deaths, not the location or cause, the information it does provide suggests higher losses than the Botha regime was ready to acknowledge. It lists 5 officers who died within the period of 3 September 1987 (Lieutenant R.W. Glynn) and 8 June 1988 (Colonel A. Bekker). This time falls within the major military engagements at Cuito Cuanavale and the Cuban drive to the Namibian border. As all five were officers (the other three were two majors and a captain), it is not unreasonable to assume that they would have been pilots.<sup>819</sup>

The increase in Cuban air power, of course, was particularly alarming for Pretoria. Malan captured this concern: “When you see this type of aircraft traffic, you’ve got to think. You’ve got to say what the hell is going on.”<sup>820</sup> This concern was raised in the South African parliament. On 17 May 1988, Roger Hulley, Progressive Federal Party member, said to his fellow parliamentarians that the Angolans and Cubans had “gained some air superiority or, at least, it would appear that we have lost the clear air superiority we once enjoyed.”<sup>821</sup> Calueque, Vale noted in a *The Weekly Mail* article, had demonstrated “Angolan air superiority in the battle for supremacy.”<sup>822</sup> The air superiority gained by the Cuban pilots over their South African antagonists was a theme that

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<sup>819</sup> *South African Air Force Roll of Honour*, 2, 4, 9 & 10

<sup>820</sup> *Cuba! Africa! Revolution!*

<sup>821</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, 17 May 1988, 9971

<sup>822</sup> P. Vale, “The 13 unlucky years between the two battles of Calueque”, *The Weekly Mail*, 1-7 July 1988



dominated several western newspaper articles discussing the shift in military power. The *New York Times* reported:

The Cubans also fly advanced MiG-23 fighters, which many experts say will outperform South Africa's top fighter plane, an updated version of the French Mirage F-1 called the Cheetah. South African Air Force officers say they are confident that the Cheetah and their flying skills are more than a match for the MiGs, but concede they cannot afford to lose many planes.<sup>823</sup>

Coupled with the dramatic increase in the quantity and quality of Cuban air power was the forward deployment of this air power at the new airfield at Cahama. The proximity of the airfield to the border enhanced Cuban air superiority. Geldenhuys noted that the South African airforce "had to operate from much further...The disadvantages were obvious."<sup>824</sup> He added that the distance the South African fighters had to fly only allowed "17-20 minutes over the combat area," while Cuban and Angolan pilots had "approximately 45 minutes over the battlefield."<sup>825</sup> The June 29, 1988 CIA report emphasized the advantage the proximity of the Cahama airfield and the deployment of antiaircraft batteries now conferred on Cuban forces:

They have established forward bomber and fighter bases to support their ground forces near the frontier at Cahama, Xangongo and Mupa. This includes the most advanced array of surveillance, fire-control radar and antiaircraft missile defenses on the African continent, South African and American officials say.<sup>826</sup>

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<sup>823</sup> B. E. Trainor, "South Africa's Strategy in Angola Falls Short, Enhancing Cubans' Role", *New York Times*, 12 July 1988. See also H. Goodman, A tug of peace in war-weary Angola, *U.S. News and Report*, 15 August 1988, 30-31

<sup>824</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 294

<sup>825</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>826</sup> South Africa-Angola-Cuba, Central Intelligence Agency, 29 June 1988, quoted in P. Gleijeses, *La causa mas bonita: Cuba y Africa, 1975-1988*, 65-66



The military advantage and, with that, the military initiative had now passed firmly into the Cuban hands. Former SADF soldier Helmoed-Romer Heitman stated unequivocally that South Africa lost “the total air supremacy they had been used to.”<sup>827</sup> Castro agreed, arguing that it was Cuba’s air power, augmented by the Cahama airstrip, that tipped the strategic scales against the SADF, pointing out that “with the construction of the airport, and anti-aircraft support, Cuban air superiority was so significant the enemy backed down...”<sup>828</sup> South African could no longer compete in the battle for the skies. Its airforce was decidedly outclassed.

Moreover, it could not afford to lose the aircraft that it did have. As *The Times* noted South Africa had lost “irreplaceable aircraft.”<sup>829</sup> Voices within the South African establishment now also raised the alarm. The Johannesburg *Business Day* in an editorial, also, weighted in with its own assessment of the dire military situation:

The price of renewed engagement in Angola, it appears increasingly plain, is a heavy battle against Cuban forces in which the loss of life will surely be considerable and in which our under-equipped, obsolescent air force may well be ruined.<sup>830</sup>

H.H. Schwarz, a Progressive Federal Party member of parliament, underscored the inability of South Africa to compete with Cuban air power, noting:

that there is no way that South Africa can have the kind of aircraft which can be supplied by East Bloc countries to neighbouring states...the quality of aircraft which they can supply is of such a nature that South Africa really cannot compete.<sup>831</sup>

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<sup>827</sup> Heitman, *War In Angola*, 310

<sup>828</sup> *Case 1/1989*, 393

<sup>829</sup> R. Kennedy, “Tit for tat”, *The Times*, 2 May 1987

<sup>830</sup> “Editorial”, *Business Daily* (Johannesburg), 12 July 1988

<sup>831</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, 18 May 1988, 10116



Schwarz also noted that the problem extended to other areas of military equipment: “There is a similar problem in relation to armour, and that is the question of heavy tanks...”<sup>832</sup> While air-power illustrated the growing gap in armaments, the gap was, also, increasing in other areas. Ronnie Kasrils, then an ANC military strategist, observed that SADF command now faced a serious crisis due to “loss of superiority to the Cubans and Angolans in the air and the outclassing of many of the Armscor weapons...”<sup>833</sup> This was echoed an article in *The Times*: “The Cuban tank force in Angola now exceeds that of the entire South African army. Cuban aircraft and radar-assisted missile defences now technically outmatch anything South Africa can send against them...”<sup>834</sup>

In the wake of the Calueque *débâcle*, Pretoria’s fears of a Cuban invasion of Namibia heightened. To prevent or at the very least delay this prospect, the SADF destroyed a bridge near Calueque, spanning the Cunene River, which marked the border between Angola and Namibia. The CIA noted that the South Africans had destroyed the bridge “to make it more difficult for the Cuban and Angolan forces to cross the Namibian border, and to reduce the number of positions they would have to defend.”<sup>835</sup> At the 25 July SSC gathering Botha asserted if the SADF had remained in Angola, it ran the risk of incurring 1,000 to 1,500 deaths.<sup>836</sup>

The fear of a Cuban invasion of Namibia widely pervaded the SADF. The *New*

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<sup>832</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>833</sup> Quoted in V. Brittain, Cuba and Southern Africa, 117-124 in *New Left Review*, N<sup>o</sup>. 172, (1988), 120

<sup>834</sup> P. Brimelow, “A blind eye to Castro”, *The Times* 9 July 1988

<sup>835</sup> South Africa-Angola-Cuba, Central Intelligence Agency, 29 June 1988 Quoted in P. Gleijeses, *La causa mas bonita: Cuba y Africa, 1975-1988*, 66

<sup>836</sup> SVR 12/88, p 5, from MoD [Group 6]



*York Times* reported: “Several South African officers say they believe that the Cubans will attack in South-West Africa and cite what they believe to be frequent violations of the airspace over Namibia by Cuban and Angolan MIG’s as an indication of a willingness to cross the border.”<sup>837</sup> These South African fears were paralleled by continued U.S. alarm over developments in Angola and was, perhaps, responsible for the July 1988 visit of David Sullivan, a staff-member of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee. According to his declassified itinerary, Sullivan met on 13 July with SADF Military Intelligence. While the content of his discussions are not known, the meeting occurred during a period when there was considerable speculation on whether Cuban forces planned to cross the border.<sup>838</sup>

Fear that Namibia would become the next battleground pervaded the upper echelons of the regime. The 25 July 1988 SSC meeting reflected these apprehensions. Botha, in summing up the ramifications of regional developments, declared “the situation in South West Africa and southern Angola is the worst the RSA [Republic of South Africa] has recently faced.”<sup>839</sup> He added that Cuban operations in Angola were part of a “carefully calculated plan,”<sup>840</sup> stating that if the military conflict reignited then South Africa would have to fight in “northern South West Africa.”<sup>841</sup> Botha revealed his trepidation over such a confrontation when he stressed that “a large-scale war can only

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<sup>837</sup> B. E. Trainor, “South Africa’s Strategy”, 12 July 1988

<sup>838</sup> Proposed Program, David Sullivan, 13 July 1988, *South African Department of Foreign Affairs Archives*

<sup>839</sup> SVR 13/88, p 6, from MoD [Group 6]

<sup>840</sup> *Ibid.*, 6

<sup>841</sup> *Ibid.*, 6



be accepted if there is no alternative.”<sup>842</sup> At the 8 August 1988 SSC meeting these apprehensions were still rife. Botha warned that Cuban forces were preparing to strike in Namibia, aiming to catch the SADF unawares during ongoing negotiations.<sup>843</sup> As late as October 1988, Pretoria continued to express anxiety about Havana’s intentions. In a *Weekly Mail* front-page story, Malan issued the warning that “Havana might even have designs on South Africa.”<sup>844</sup> In reference to Cuba’s considerable military presence, he asserted: “Where are they going? Will they wipe out Unita and is South Africa their goal?”<sup>845</sup>

Whether the Cubans would have been able to defeat the SADF in Namibia is, of course, unknown, given that they never crossed the border, and the military clash did not occur. Jeffrey Herbst, then at Princeton University, argued that the SADF would have presented a serious military obstacle to the Cuban forces: “South Africa still had a formidable military capability. If they decided to confront the Cubans in southern Angola they would have a good chance of defeating them.”<sup>846</sup> However, their failure at Cuito Cuanavale and the *débâcle* at Calueque indicate that it would not have been an easy task for the SADF, and that the Cuban and Angolans would have had a not insignificant chance of emerging victorious, or least, of inflicting considerable damage on their South African foe.

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<sup>842</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7

<sup>843</sup> SVR 14/88, 5, from MoD [Group 6]

<sup>844</sup> S. Johnson, “Peace: SA blows hot and cold”, *The Weekly Mail*, 7-13 October 1988

<sup>845</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>846</sup> H. Gilomee, Die Lesse Van Namibia [‘The Lessons of Namibia’], *Die Suid-Afrikaan*, February 1989, 3



The deployment of Cuban/Angolan forces to the Angolan/Namibian frontier radically transformed the regional balance of the military power. The United States Defence Intelligence Agency recognized this new situation, describing the Cuban military operation as a “strategic coup,” stating that the Cuban-orchestrated and led operation “ended Pretoria’s military dominance of southern Angola.”<sup>847</sup> The report further argued that this development had import that extended beyond Angola, declaring that the Cuban deployment “threatened to significantly alter the balance of power in the region” and had “redressed the military balance by challenging South African dominance along the Namibian border.”<sup>848</sup> It is interesting that Chester Crocker in his memoirs published in 1992, disagreed with this evaluation, asserting that Cuba posed no real threat to the South African forces in Namibia.<sup>849</sup> However, his later inquiries about Cuban intentions, contradict his earlier stance.<sup>850</sup> Moreover, the South African government, as a principal protagonist, demonstrated did not share Crocker’s assessment.

Unprepared for the bold Cuban move, Pretoria initially was unwillingly to accept that the tables had shifted decisively against them. While worried about the Cuban threat to its control of Namibia, Pretoria sought to restore the military *status quo* that had previously prevailed. However, the attacks on Tchipa not only did not redress the situation, but their failure, together with the Cuban counter-strike against Calueque, firmly established that a new regional dispensation of power existed. The Cuban deployment along the Namibian border altered the trajectory of the war in Angola.

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<sup>847</sup> USDIA *Lessons Learned*, (1988), 13

<sup>848</sup> *Ibid.*, 16

<sup>849</sup> Crocker, *High Noon In Southern Africa*, 368-369

<sup>850</sup> *Ibid.*, 400



## DETERMINING SADF CASUALTIES: THE SADF HONOUR ROLL

In the aftermath of the bombing of Calueque, the SADF withdrew from Angola, completing the process in August 1988. On crossing the border back into Namibia, the last of the returning SADF troops, mounted in armoured personnel carriers, were greeted with a banner that said in English and Afrikaans: “Welcome Winners/Welkom Wenners.”<sup>851</sup> Nevertheless, despite this celebratory return, many commentators insisted that Havana could have inflicted greater damage on the SADF. Victoria Brittain noted that there was “little doubt that the Cubans could have hit the retreating South African forces much harder than they did, causing many more casualties.”<sup>852</sup> In Calueque’s wake, Peter Vale, anticipating more military clashes, predicted that “the casualty rate seems tragically set to rise...”<sup>853</sup> However, no further major military engagements transpired, pre-empted by the SADF withdrawal. Mark Patrick, an SADF soldier, opined that the SADF retreat also prevented greater South African casualties: “If they [the SADF] hadn’t withdrawn, I think there would have been a lot more [South African] lives lost.”<sup>854</sup>

The plausibility of significantly higher South African casualties if further military clashes had occurred is supported by the existence of unexecuted plans for a series of air strikes by the Cuban armed forces in the event of retaliatory SADF military actions in response to the Calueque raid. While the Calueque clash proved to be the last major military engagement of the conflict, Havana considered further and larger air strikes

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<sup>851</sup> Bravo, *After the Battle*

<sup>852</sup> Brittain (1988), 122

<sup>853</sup> P. Vale, “The 13 unlucky years between the two battles of Calueque”, *The Weekly Mail*, 1-7 July 1988

<sup>854</sup> Bravo, *After the Battle*



against SADF positions in Namibia. Castro sent a cable instructing that preparations be made to respond any SADF action: “You must be ready to strike a strong blow at enemy bases in northern Namibia, that is, the response prepared for a large-scale enemy air raid. You must consider which variants would inflict the largest casualty toll on the enemy.”<sup>855</sup> Even though the SADF attack never materialized, Havana still considered launching an airstrike. Lieutenant Colonel Eduardo Gonzalez Saria described a planned operation to bomb SADF military installations in Namibia. It was deemed too dangerous and also rejected as unnecessary and dishonourable because the SADF had not retaliated for the Calueque and involved attacking the South Africans as they slept:

In 1988, we had the opportunity of hitting the main South African military base in Namibia. A plan was proposed. But it was turned down. The commander was told that the plan was not only risky but that a full attack would not be authorized that would result in the soldiers and officers being targeted while they slept in their barracks. This was an ethical principle. Some of us were upset that we were not going to hit those sons of bitches. But that was our ethical principle.<sup>856</sup>

The discussion of hypothetical and potential South African casualties aside, the question remains: How many SADF soldiers were actually killed during the battles of 1987-88, in particular, and the entire period apartheid South Africa was militarily intervening in Angola, in general? The number of white deaths has been a central point of debate, proving to be probably the most controversial issue of the entire conflict. Both sides of the conflict, as we have seen, gave very different figures for various engagements. This divergence and the Pretoria’s reluctance about releasing casualty rates fueled speculation in the western media. Pretoria’s reticence was reflected in the refusal to present broad figures, or to identify those who were injured or killed. A 1976 decision had established

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<sup>855</sup> *Case 1/1989*, 391-392

<sup>856</sup> Interview with Eduardo Gonzalez Saria



“official SADF policy not to reveal their names or provide statistics.”<sup>857</sup>

Increasingly, the scale of white casualties was a significant topic in western newspapers.<sup>858</sup> *The Economist* discussed what it termed Pretoria’s conundrum: the SADF needed to “keep more white conscripts than it wants” in service, when there were “not enough young white men to call on.”<sup>859</sup> As the conflict lasted into late 1987 and then stretched into 1988, a central thread in two articles published in the *Guardian* and *The New York Times* was the sensitivity of Pretoria to the mounting death toll.<sup>860</sup> Both *The Independent* and *The New York Times* reported SADF Chief of Staff General Geldenhuys’ statement that Pretoria had only suffered 31 deaths.<sup>861</sup> A 5 August 1988 report by Hirsch Goodman, the Johannesburg-based correspondent for the *U.S. News & World Report*, put the death toll at 80<sup>862</sup>

However, none of the reports, whether in the western or South African

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<sup>857</sup> G. Cawthra, *Brutal Force: The Apartheid War Machine* (London, 1986), 178

<sup>858</sup> See, for example: “4 South African soldiers said to die in Angola”, *New York Times*, 13 November 1987; “Pretoria reports 5 died in Angola”, *New York Times*, 14 November 1987; “S. African toll swells in Angola”, *New York Post*, 14 November 1987; “SA confirms Angolan casualties”, *The Independent*, 13 November 1987; “S. Africans die as Unita claims big victory in Angola”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 13 November 1987; John Battersby and Arik Bachah, “South African Losses Mount In Angola’s Secrecy-Shrouded War”, *Reuters*, 23 February 1988; “Angolan death toll mounts amid Cuban pullout rumors”, *Reuters*, 29 February 1988; and “More Whites in South Africa Resisting the Draft”, *New York Times*, 28 March 1988

<sup>859</sup> “Angola’s deadly stalemate”, *The Economist*, 27 February 1988

<sup>860</sup> “In Angola up to its neck”, *The Guardian*, 13 November 1987; J. Battersby, “More whites in South Africa resisting the draft”, *New York Times*, 28 March 1988

<sup>861</sup> D. Crary, “General describes SA role in Angola,” *The Independent*, 9 April 1988; J. D. Battersby, “South Africa Gives Details of Angola Military Role”, *New York Times*, 20 April 1988

<sup>862</sup> H. Goodman, A Tug of Peace in War-Wearied Angola, *U.S. News & World Report*, 15 August 1988, 30



newspapers, could resolve the contradictions between the conflicting death figures provided by Luanda and Pretoria. For example, a *Weekly Mail* article reported conflicting statements on the actual number of SADF deaths and aircraft shot down, with Luanda asserting 230 deaths and 16 aircraft downed, Pretoria 35 and 3.<sup>863</sup> In a 20 November 1987 report, *The Sowetan* cited a figure of 21 deaths.<sup>864</sup> A follow-up article stated that the South African armed forces had sustained casualties “on a scale that has shocked the white South African community.”<sup>865</sup> *The Star* ran two articles on South African losses, challenging Pretoria’s figures by emphasizing that the SADF failed to disclose actual casualties by admitting that only 31 soldiers, 3 tanks and 1 fighter-plane had been lost. To add weight to its claims, *The Star* quoted Roger Hully, who during the parliamentary debates on the budget challenged Malan’s figures, observing that Malan had not mentioned the losses of the SWATF. Hully further stated: “In contrast overseas estimates put the combined losses of the SADF and SWATF at hundreds of troops and up to 20 aircraft and more equipment.”<sup>866</sup> Malan’s response to Hully was to reaffirm his statement that only 31 members of the SADF died. He also gave a casualty figure for the SWATF of 12 killed.<sup>867</sup>

Western and South African newspapers could speculate on a higher death toll than officially acknowledged by the Botha regime, but they could not offer definitive evidence to support their claims. What prevailed was the contest of opposing warring

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<sup>863</sup> G. Evans, “All along the Magnus line, 50 km deep into Angola”, *The Weekly Mail*, 20 - 26 November 1987

<sup>864</sup> “SADF invasion slammed”, *The Sowetan*, 20 November 1987

<sup>865</sup> “Angola: 7 points for peace”, *The Sowetan*, 23 November 1987

<sup>866</sup> “Losses inflicted by MPLA ‘much higher’”, *The Star*, 18 May 1988

<sup>867</sup> “31 SADF killed in Angola – Malan”, *The Star*, 19 May 1988



parties' statistics. Pretoria and SADF officers always insisted on a comparatively low death toll. In two addresses in 1988 (16 and 18 May) to the South African parliament, Malan admitted to only 31 deaths.<sup>868</sup> As noted, General Geldenhuys supported Malan's low numbers. In his memoirs, Geldenhuys reiterated that only 31 SADF soldiers were killed in combat, with another six dying from malaria.<sup>869</sup> Major General Thirion asserted that at most there were "not more than" 50 SADF deaths in 1987-88.<sup>870</sup> While acknowledging that he was airlifted from the Cuito Cuanavale theatre in a helicopter with "four or five dead bodies," Hein Groenewald stated that there not many white deaths: "We would not have had that many. Maybe 20."<sup>871</sup> While admitting that he "heard rumours of extensive losses," Colonel Gerhard Louw, denied there were high SADF casualties.<sup>872</sup>

While not releasing its overall estimates of SADF mortality figures for the 1987-1988 conflict, various Cuban accounts have asserted death figures for specific military engagements. Taken together these claims indicate a higher death toll than the 31 asserted by the apartheid regime. For example, Cuban sources claimed that the March 1st attack on Cuito Cuanavale resulted in 20 SADF deaths.<sup>873</sup> The 27 June Calueque air-raid, they asserted killed a minimum of 50 South Africans.<sup>874</sup> Rafael Tamayo, who was

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<sup>868</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, 16 May 1988, 9926, and *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, 18 May 1988, 10162

<sup>869</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 223

<sup>870</sup> Interview with Major General Chris Thirion

<sup>871</sup> Interview with Hein Groenewald

<sup>872</sup> Interview with Colonel Gerhard Louw

<sup>873</sup> Blanch, *Cuba: pequeño gigante*, 75

<sup>874</sup> Gomez, *En El Sur*, 81



director of the Cuban community development projects in South Africa, recounted a dinner hosted by a white South African family. A guest disrupted the dinner because he became very upset when he discovered that a Cuban was present. Tamayo stated that the man was upset “because he said he had lost sixty of his men at Cuito Cuanavale.”<sup>875</sup>

Non-Cuban sources are adamant that the death toll was much higher than South African admissions. Jose Kupussu, a former sergeant in the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, who fought at Cuito Cuanavale was adamant that the death toll was much higher than the officially admitted 31-deaths. He stated that he personally saw the SADF dead. According to Kupussu, after one of the attacks on the Tumpo triangle, the 32nd Battalion was given the task of cadaver retrieval:

Many whites died at Cuito Cuanavale. This story of only about 30 is a lie! I saw it for myself. Members of the 32nd Battalion were sent in to help in the recovery of the bodies. But later the fire was too intense and we had to get out of there and bodies were left behind.<sup>876</sup>

This charge of mendacity against the SADF has been a frequent one. Ronnie Kasrils, a member of the ANC leadership, stated that the SADF “covered up the number of deaths.”<sup>877</sup> This is the stance of Susan Hurlich, an activist with the MPLA and SWAPO during the 1987-88 conflict: “The South Africans didn’t want to admit how many had actually died, because of the demoralization this would cause at home [*i.e.*, among white South Africans]. They claimed a South African victory rather than a defeat.”<sup>878</sup> Among the highest figures claimed is a death toll of 300-400 by Colonel Stuart Watson, who was

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<sup>875</sup> Interview with Rafael Tamayo, Pretoria, 24 July 2006

<sup>876</sup> Interview with Jose Kupussu

<sup>877</sup> Interview with Ronnie Kasrils

<sup>878</sup> Letter from Susan Hurlich (*activist with MPLA and SWAPO*), 11 January 2005



stationed at Cuito Cuanavale during the battle.<sup>879</sup> Perhaps the most persistent proponent of a higher SADF death toll is SANDF Colonel Patrick Ricketts, a former MK member and currently the Chair of the Ex-Combatants Association. He has led several trips to Cuito Cuanavale (including the actual battle sites), asserting the remains of numerous SADF soldiers still lie in the Tumpo Triangle:

Hundreds of remains of SADF soldiers (skeletons in SADF as well as UNITA uniforms) are still trapped in the minefields at the Tumpo Triangle. We visited the site recently (April 2004) and established this unknown reality to the SA community...Many SADF members also wish to deny this reality as a result of their loyalty to the Apartheid [*sic*] military generals as well as to Apartheid [*sic*] itself...Lastly, whoever wants to deny this reality, I wish him or her to accompany us by helicopter with a media team and then explain the current reality at the Tumpo Triangle to the South African population.<sup>880</sup>

In lieu of a professional and comprehensive forensic survey of the Tumpo Triangle, Ricketts' claims cannot be confirmed or denied. Such an undertaking is probably not going to happen in the short term, as the area remains extremely dangerous due to the numerous active mines that suffuse the area. Any survey under the present conditions would be a hazardous, death-defying enterprise, best left to the time when Cuito Cuanavale and its environs have been thoroughly de-mined. Thus, notwithstanding the extent of the anecdotal evidence or the "eye witness accounts," the onus is on those who argue for a higher death rate to present persuasive evidence that supports their case. It would seem that without compelling physical and documentary evidence to the contrary, *prima facie*, the SADF official figures must be accepted (albeit with caution and reservations).

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<sup>879</sup> Interview with Stuart Watson

<sup>880</sup> Email from Colonel Patrick Ricketts, former MK member and currently the Chair of the Ex-Combatants Association and member of the SANDF, 22 December 2004. See also interview with Ricketts in H. Jansen, Sand of Iyke in SAW-doodkiste [Sand or corpses in South African army coffins]? *Rapport*, 6 Maart, 2005, 15



While the declarations by Ricketts and others of a higher death toll than officially admitted by the SADF appear speculative, evidence pointing to a much higher death toll than officially acknowledged comes from two sources. First, evidence exists in a surprising, very public and virtually unnoticed form: the *South African War Memorial* (officially known as the *South African Defence Force Memorial*) in Pretoria. The War Memorial includes plaques listing names of the SADF members who died while in active-service in military operations from its inception in 1957 to when it was replaced in 1994 by the SANDF. It includes plaques for the years 1987 and 1988. While the place and exact date of each death are not recorded, the plaques make for interesting reading and extrapolation. There are two series of plaques for 1987 with a total of 138 inscribed names. For 1988, there is one principal series of plaques, with one entry for 1988 appearing elsewhere. The total of names recorded for 1988 is 109. Thus, for 1987 and 1988 a total of 247 SADF deaths are recorded.

The vast majority of names appear to be Afrikaner or English names. Out of the 247 names, only 32 seem to be non-Afrikaner and non-English.<sup>881</sup> While, the names in-and-of themselves are not indicative of the number of white deaths, they are suggestive. By the mid-1980s an estimated 24 per cent of the SADF troops were nonwhite. The most experienced and battle hardened troops were white, comprising the frontline formations deployed to southern Angola. Their loyalty, as whites, to the apartheid state was unquestioned by the SADF, while nonwhite troops were deemed to be less trustworthy. The exception was the 32<sup>nd</sup> battalion (the Buffalo Soldiers), which often fought on the frontlines. The 32<sup>nd</sup> battalion aside, white-troops predominantly shouldered the fighting in Angola.

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<sup>881</sup> Visit to South African Defence Force Memorial, 27 July 2006, Pretoria



While the memorial does not indicate where, when and how each person died, it does indicate that at least 247 persons died, in one way or another, while on active SADF-service during 1987-88. The qualification “at least” is used because the War Memorial only contains the names of those buried in the *National Military Cemetery*, located at the Thaba Tshwane military base in Pretoria. Many soldiers who died in Angola or elsewhere were buried in their hometowns.<sup>882</sup> The cemetery is divided into sections that correspond to different years. However, it includes the graves of those who did not die in while in active-service in military operations, which accounts for the more than 300 graves in the sections set aside for 1987 and 1988. Nevertheless, as would be expected these sections contain various graves of SADF soldiers whose date of death corresponded with the military engagements in southern Angola.<sup>883</sup>

While, the War Memorial is suggestive, in and of it self, it is not conclusive. It does not indicate when in 1987 and 1988 the deaths occurred, and if they were in Angola. However, the second source of evidence is, however, more authoritative and comprehensive: the *South African Defence Force Roll of Honour*.<sup>884</sup> This internal SADF document lists all the SADF personnel who died during active military service from 1962 to its dissolution in 1994. Its authenticity is attested to by a number of factors; it was procured from a senior officer in the SANDF who copied it at the SANDF’s headquarters, all the names at the War Memorial appear in the *Roll of Honour* with the years of death also corresponding, and lastly, names that do not appear on the War Memorial because those SADF personnel were buried elsewhere appear in the *Roll of*

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<sup>882</sup> Interview with Director of South African Defence Force Memorial, 27 July 2006, Pretoria. Name withheld by request.

<sup>883</sup> Visit to National Military Cemetery, 28 July 2006, Pretoria

<sup>884</sup> *Roll of Honour* (Pretoria: South African Defence Force, n.d.)



*Honour*. An example is William Wallace who was killed in Angola on March 9, 1987, and was buried in Paarl, just outside Cape Town.<sup>885</sup> While his name does not appear on the War Memorial, it appears in the *Roll of Honour*.

From August 1987 to June 1988, the *Roll of Honour* lists 145 SADF soldiers who died while in active service. However, its authority and detail does have limits. First, the SADF *Roll of Honour* is exactly that, the catalogue of the members of the SADF who died in military service. It does not include the deaths of those who were called up from the Citizen Force, as they would not have been recorded on service or payroll rosters. While the SADF *Roll of Honour* provides more information than the War Memorial (giving the date of death, location and cause), it does not do so consistently. The date of death is the single most reliably recorded piece of information; it is available for 2,080 of the 2,084 deaths recorded. However, quite often location and cause is omitted. This is particularly applicable for the information given for 1987 and 1988. While it was an internal document, precautions were taken (as with the SSC minutes) to ensure if it ever fell into the hands of someone outside the desired circle, it would be difficult to determine where the deaths occurred and what were the causes. This would make it difficult to ascribe the deaths to the war in Angola.

From August 1987 to the end of June 1988, covering the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale and the confrontations on the Namibian border, 145 deaths are recorded. Of these, 17 are recorded to have died at specified locations within South Africa. Of these 17 deaths, 6 were acknowledged to have been killed by “enemy” forces (Black South Africans, including many based in Swaziland, Lesotho, Botswana, Zambia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe; as well as Angolan and Cuban armed forces) operating in South African

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<sup>885</sup> Interview with Ann-Marie Wallace, Paarl, 11 August 2006



territory or Namibian (“South West Africa”) territory administered by the South African government. The other 11 deaths were recorded as the result of training accidents, acts of personal negligence, or inflicted by other SADF members. During this period, another 128 deaths were identified without any explicit information as to location: whether in South Africa, Namibia or Angola. Of these 64 were recorded to have been killed by the “enemy,” i.e., external enemy, forces in operations sometimes initiated by the SADF (but sometimes not). The other 64 were the result of training accidents, acts of personal negligence or inflicted by other SADF members.

The number of deaths attributed to training accidents or acts of personal negligence by SADF members was quite high: 75 out of 145 for 51.7 per cent. Ann-Marie Wallace said that the SADF gave her and other mothers of sons who had died while in active service “the impression that most died in accidents.”<sup>886</sup> Maj. Gen. Thirion stated that most of the deaths in 1987-88 were the result of accidents or other mishaps, such as crashes, illness or accidental shootings, with one SADF soldier “killed by a crocodile.”<sup>887</sup> However, it has been asserted that the category of accidental death was used to hide the actual number of deaths in combat, with any battle related deaths reported as accidents.

It has been alleged that the SADF deliberately and liberally assigned deaths to the accident and disease categories, minimizing the reported combat deaths. Therefore, the assertion is not only that the actual death toll was low, but the deaths were primarily the result of a variety of accidents: incidents that probably would have happened during peacetime in the normal course of armed forces activities. Drawing on official figures

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<sup>886</sup> Interview with Ann-Marie Wallace

<sup>887</sup> Interview with Major General Chris Thirion



released for the 1979-1983, Christopher Coker noted that according to the SADF's public admission there had been 647 accidental deaths, with more than 3,000 injured as a result of accidents. Those who were killed in combat amounted to 107.<sup>888</sup> Coker concluded this led to the conclusion that "the South African army is unusually accident prone or else casualties in the field have been deliberately disguised as accident statistics."<sup>889</sup>

Obfuscation by accident aside, it seems reasonable to assume that the larger the military operation the greater the number of accidents that will occur. Thus, accidental deaths, while not directly a result of combat, could be indirectly linked to the military operation aimed at capturing Cuito Cuanavale and challenging Cuban forces along the border. Major General Thirion stated the SADF Cuito Cuanavale campaign grew to involve thousands of troops, with increasingly "a large number of them drawn from the national service men."<sup>890</sup> Eventually the operation, he stated, grew to encompass at least 20,000 troops, either in combat roles in Angola or in a support capacity in Namibia.<sup>891</sup> Whether, these "death by accident numbers" are accurate or truthful, it seems reasonable to ascribe them, at least, indirectly to the SADF 1987-88 military operations in Angola.

However, these rates of "attrition by accident" do strain credulity. The SADF was engaged in active military combat in southern Angola for 11-months, with 7-months devoted, first to the determined pursuit and destruction of retreating Angolan forces, and then to the siege and repeatedly efforts to capture Cuito Cuanavale. This was then

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<sup>888</sup> Coker, *South Africa's Security*, 44. See Crawford, *The Domestic Consequences*, 23

<sup>889</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>890</sup> Interview with Major General Chris Thirion

<sup>891</sup> *Ibid.*



followed in the final four months by the series of confrontations in and around Tchipa and the Cuban air-raid on Calueque. The size, duration and intensity of this deployment would support projections of a higher death toll from combat than the publicly and officially claimed 31 deaths. The SADF *Roll of Honour*, the War Memorial, Cuban accounts, personal testimonies and the various media reports provide objective confirmation of a higher death toll. Together they constitute a solid basis for the conclusion that more than 31 SADF soldiers were killed in the fighting in southern Angola in 1987-1988. Or, at the very least, the onus is now shifted on to those who advocate for the SADF official death toll to rebut this evidence. The *Roll of Honour* and the War Memorial, however, seem very difficult to rebut, as they are products of the SADF itself. While the other sources can be diminished in value as being a species of hearsay, the *Roll of Honour* and the War Memorial constitute a form of direct SADF documentary testimony.

Beyond the number of deaths, the *Roll of Honour* also indicates which were the most intense casualty periods (whether in accident or combat categories) for the SADF during the 1975-1988 South African interventions and invasions of Angola. It lists 2,084 deaths for the years 1962 to 1994. From August 1975 to December 1988, 1,611 SADF personnel are recorded as being killed while in active-service. Thus, more than 77 per cent of SADF deaths occurred during the SADF's military interventions throughout southern Africa.

Some periods of fighting were more intense than others. The most intensive period was the Cuito Cuanavale period from August 1987 to June 1988, in which 145 died. In the 12 years preceding the 1987-1988 conflict, August 1975 to July 1987, some 1,424 are recorded as killed in repeated South African incursions at the Namibian-



Angolan border and-or in the Ovamboland territory in northern Namibia on the Angolan border, with the most intense period being from February 1985 to August 1986 when 133 SADF members were killed in numerous incidents. These skirmishes ranged in geographic extent from the eastern tip of the Caprivi Strip border region between Namibia and Angola (plus Botswana, Zimbabwe and Zambia) to the Ovamboland zone of the Namibian-Angolan border. Over that 18-month period, there were very few months in which the SADF did not record fatalities in these zones. Similarly, during the 21-month period from November 1980 to July 1982, some 290 SADF members died at various locations along the Namibian-Angolan border.

Beyond the intensity of casualties, the most telling information provided by the *Roll of Honour* is the demographic breakdown. It is a window through which to specifically determine which age groups sustained the greatest number of dead and had the highest death rate. The *Roll of Honour* is unequivocal on this matter. This, of course, does not provide us directly with the quantitative death rates for each age group. For this, the roster of all those who served in the SADF (with their ages) would be required. Together with the *Roll of Honour*, it would then be possible to calculate accurately the death rates. What can be determined is what age groups made-up the greatest proportion of the SADF dead. Nevertheless, from the available information a reasonable qualitative inference and extrapolation can be made about which age groups were dying in the greatest proportionate numbers.

According to the *Roll of Honour*, the 20-29 age group made-up the highest average proportion of recorded deaths. Of 2,084 SADF members whose date of death is recorded, there are 78 whose age at the time of their death is unknown. Among the remaining 2,002 deaths: 8 were more than 60 years of age; 18 were 50-59; 58 were 40-



49; 230 were 30-39; 1,005 were of 20-29, and 683 under 20. Thus, 50.2 per cent of the dead (i.e., more than half) were 20-29 years, with 34.1 per cent (i.e., more than one-third) being under 20-years old. Thus, those under 30 constitute 84.3 per cent of all recorded deaths. Of 1,352 (whose ages are known) to have died during the 12-year period, from 1 August 1975 to 31 July 1987, preceding the Cuito Cuanavale period, while recorded to be involved in SADF actions at the Namibian-Angolan border or in the Ovamboland area in northern Namibia on the Angolan border, 21 were aged 50 years or over; 37 were 40-49; 56 were 30-39; 644 were 20-29, and 494 were under 20. Thus, those under 20-29 years old represent 47.6 per cent of deaths, those under 20 36.5 per cent. Those under 30 years old make up the largest proportion (84.2 per cent) of deaths. While this figure is slightly lower than the mean for this age group in the total death count, the statistic for those under 20 (36.5 per cent) is 4.1 per cent higher.

The death percentages for the Cuito Cuanavale period, August 1987 to June 1988, are revealing. Of the 145 deaths whose ages are known: 0 were age 50 or over; 3 were 40-49; 10 were 30-39; 98 were 20-29, and 33 were under 20. The death percentage for the 20-29 year olds of 67.6 per cent (i.e., more than two-thirds) is 42 per cent (i.e., more than two-fifths) higher than the average mean during South Africa's 1975-88 military intervention in southern Africa, and 34.7 per cent higher for this age group in the total death count. The death mean for those under 20 (22.8 per cent) is lower (37.5 per cent) than the mean for the period of intervention, and lower (33.1 per cent) than the mean for this age-group in the total death count. However, the entire set of those under-30 constitute 90.3 per cent (i.e., more than nine-tenths) of all the deaths.

What do these figures imply? While the under-30 Cuito Cuanavale figure is roughly similar (being only seven per cent higher) to the figures for the entire history of



the SADF and the period confined to regional incursions, it demonstrates the continuing and increasing attrition in the ranks of those aged 29 and younger. The figures do not indicate how many or the percentage of the under 30s registered in the SADF were killed. Nevertheless, the fact that so many of the SADF dead was under the age of 30 warrants the conclusion that not only did this group have the highest death rate but that they must also have been deployed in the field in the greatest numbers. The testimony of Hein Groenewald supports this conclusion, as he stated that most of those who fought in his unit and others deployed in southern Angola ranged in age from 18 to early twenties.<sup>892</sup>

Of course, it is always this age grouping that comprises the majority of combat troops and consequently suffers the most casualties in any active armed forces. It is a key group, constituting the fittest and most freshly trained core of battle ready troops. Therefore, the inability to keep the death rate down necessarily marked a crisis for the SADF. Also, as previously noted, the *Roll of Honour* does not include those who were killed in the Citizen Force. During, for example, the last South African assault on Cuito Cuanavale several Citizen Force regiments was integrated into the 82nd South African Brigade. Therefore, it is plausible that the actual numbers of deaths and the death rates are probably higher than what can be ascertained directly or indirectly from the *Roll of Honour*. What seems clear is that the number of deaths that can be attributed to the SADF's 1987-1988 campaign in Angola exceeds the officially admitted figure by at least two to four times, and quite probably was even higher.

*Prima facie* the death toll does not appear high. Nonetheless, the increase in the number of deaths in 1987-88 over previous periods is a strong indication of the intensity

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<sup>892</sup> Interview with Hein Groenewald



of the battles. It also highlighted the growing wear and tear on the SADF, and the mounting challenges it faced to retain its fighting prowess. The Botha regime was, of course, quite sensitive and cognizant that the SADF could not sustain or absorb such a death rate. At the 20 June 1988 SSC meeting, Botha observed that South Africa could not maintain a prolonged presence in Angola.<sup>893</sup> At the 25 July 1988, he projected a potential death toll of 1, 000 to 1,500 if the SADF stayed in Angola.<sup>894</sup>

Pretoria had a core of well-trained and battle-hardened troops. However, their numbers were limited and much more difficult to replenish as the SADF drew the vast majority of its conscripts from the white community, especially on short notice as in the 1987-1988 conflict. As discussed in Chapters Two and Three, at various points during the campaign in Angola, the SADF confronted the problem of exhausted troops who were physically and psychological drained. While the number of FAPLA deaths was magnitudes higher, they had a much larger pool to draw on, and could and did have the capacity to absorb this death toll and still carry on fighting. These troops might not have been as well trained or equipped as those of the SADF, but there were always more to call on.

In the final assault on Cuito Cuanavale, the SADF was forced to rely heavily on inexperienced troops from the Citizen force. Valuable fighting assets had been brought to the front lines in a series of unsuccessful attempts to seize Cuito Cuanavale and assert the SADF's supremacy, either as an actual-fact on the ground or as a very real psychological fear among its enemies. The consequence was the degradation of not only the fighting capacity but, also, as will be argued, the fighting spirit of the SADF.

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<sup>893</sup> SVR 12/88, p 5, from MoD [Group 6]

<sup>894</sup> Ibid., p 6



## SADF MORALE

During the 13-year intervention in Angola, morale among South African soldiers increasingly declined. Months of combat and being in the field had had a significant psychological effect. Bridgland stated that many South African soldiers who fought from December 1987 to February 1988 had to be treated for post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSS).<sup>895</sup> Gary Baines, a Rhodes University researcher, documented the impact of PTSS on SADF troops of the prolonged Angolan campaign. His work uncovered several instances of what, he termed, the “psycho-social casualties” of the war.<sup>896</sup> Hein Groenewald, an SADF soldier at Cuito Cuanavale and a recipient of the *Pro Patria Medal* for service in the defence of the Republic of South Africa, stated that many of those whose who served with him suffered from what were clearly symptoms of post traumatic stress syndrome. He himself was afflicted, declaring: “My brain wanted to wipe the war from my memory. I am now trying to put the pieces together.”<sup>897</sup> Clive Holt also expressed the notion that there were unpleasant experiences that he could not escape from, particularly memories of the SADF dead: “The stench of the body bags remain with me.”<sup>898</sup>

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<sup>895</sup> Bridgland, *The War for Africa*, 315

<sup>896</sup> G. Baines, Blame, Shame or Reaffirmation? White Conscripts Reassess the Meaning of the ‘Border War’ in Post-Apartheid South Africa, *InterCulture*, ‘V’, (2008), 214-228; G. Baines. n.d. [but probably 2008; see bibliographical entry *infra*]. *Trauma in Transition: Representing Psychological Problems of South African War Veterans* (published online — see Bibliography entry for details); G. Baines, Breaking Rank: Secrets, Silences and Stories of South Africa’s Border War, paper presented at *4th Global Conference of Interdisciplinary [dot]Net — a Global Network for Dynamic Research and Publishing*, (Budapest, 2007)

<sup>897</sup> Interview with Hein Groenewald

<sup>898</sup> Herman Jansen, Reuk van lysak bly die soldaat by, *Rapport*, 6 March 2005, 15



The conditions of living and fighting in Angola or Namibian, a country of unfamiliar terrain, culture and, often, unwelcoming people, contributed to generating a feeling of disorientation and estrangement. Soldiers often spoke of many of their colleagues succumbing to *bossiekoors* or “bush fever.” Uys du Buisson described this condition as the ultimate manifestation of the feeling of demoralization and disaffection that many SADF soldiers felt. Those in this state would hallucinate and engage in self-destructive behaviour. The ground troops often referred to this as being *bosbefok* or “bush fucked.”<sup>899</sup>

This sentiment or condition was often exacerbated by a general sense of confusion on the nature and purpose of their military missions. Hein Groenewald stated that most of those he served with had no idea why they were fighting in Angola, and did not even know they would be going to Angola when they were called up for SADF service. When he was deployed, Groenewald acknowledged that he “did not know we were going to Angola.”<sup>900</sup> Most, according to Groenewald had a vague concept of fighting against communism. Part of SADF indoctrination was persuading recruits they were serving the good of all South Africans by preventing communist expansion throughout the region. Ann-Marie Wallace said that her son “saw the war as defending South Africa from communism. My son wanted to go fight for his country.”<sup>901</sup> Andre Zaaiman stated that he and his fellow recruits “were told our occupation of Namibia was in the interest of all South Africans and Namibians. That the SADF was a neutral force –

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<sup>899</sup> Interview with Uys du Buisson, former SADF soldier, Pretoria, 5 August 2006

<sup>900</sup> Interview with Hein Groenewald

<sup>901</sup> Interview with Ann-Marie Wallace



SWAPO and the ANC had little support.”<sup>902</sup>

In Groenewald’s opinion, beyond superficial anti-communism, SADF recruits and even seasoned soldiers had little understanding of the context of political or international relations that framed and affected South Africa. He argued that this was due to their youth. He was 18 years old when he was conscripted, “straight out of high school with very little political education.”<sup>903</sup> Ian Liebenberg, who served in the SADF in the 1970s, agreed with Groenewald’s characterization of the average conscripts understanding of the conflict: “South African troops were conscripted. They were not given the full picture.”<sup>904</sup> Groenewald asserted that this lack of information on behalf of the conscripts was a product of the general state of consciousness in South Africa about the SADF’s intervention in Angola: “No one knew. There was very limited knowledge of our involvement in Angola. It was a very important war but no one knew about it.”<sup>905</sup> The SADF recruits being products of South African society necessarily reflected this limited awareness. Liebenberg’s experience also illustrated this situation:

I worked as a young graphic designer. A friend came from London and told me: “Your army is in Angola.” I replied: “No. That’s not true.” Then two weeks later I got a telegram from the SADF and next thing I was in Angola. I suddenly realized there was a world outside South Africa.<sup>906</sup>

Demoralization and disaffection was not only manifested in psychological dissonance but also in active and conscious acts of opposition to the war and service in the SADF.

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<sup>902</sup> Skote Klap in bly styl om diesplig, *Die Suid-Afrikaan*, October/November 1988, 17

<sup>903</sup> Interview with Hein Groenewald

<sup>904</sup> Interview with Ian Liebenberg, Pretoria, 11 August 2006

<sup>905</sup> Interview with Hein Groenewald

<sup>906</sup> Interview with Ian Liebenberg



Some personnel in the SADF saw their time in the armed forces as “forced service.”<sup>907</sup> SADF troops viewed their time on the border as *vasbyting* (“biting the bullet”). They described their experience as *vasbyt* (“grinding their teeth and baring it”) until their tour of duty was completed.<sup>908</sup> Anthony Feinstein stated that he lost faith in the SADF war goals, his “priority in Owamboland had become a selfish one: to survive the tour of duty and get home to safety, family and friends.”<sup>909</sup>

Disaffection, or at least ambivalence, towards service in the SADF led to acts of defiance. Despite SADF efforts to suppress public knowledge of these acts, reports surfaced of equipment been deliberately damaged.<sup>910</sup> Desertion almost began to emerge as a problem. This was reflected in the 1981 desertion figures for Namibia, where of the 577 SADF personnel held in military prison “519 were serving sentences for refusing to serve in the field or for going absent without leave.”<sup>911</sup> This opposition to military service was not confined to the SADF. In November 1987, the SWATF, a SADF auxiliary force, suffered a mutiny of its 101st Battalion. Four hundred soldiers, comprised of blacks from the Ovambo region, refused to fight in Angola. This was reported as “the first significant sign of discontent among South African and allied forces with the invasion of southern Angola.”<sup>912</sup> One soldier who refused to serve is quoted as saying:

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<sup>907</sup> Interview with Hein Groenewald, Pretoria, 2 August 2006

<sup>908</sup> G. Baines, South Africa’s Vietnam? Literary History and Cultural Memory of the Border War, *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Comparative Studies*, ‘V’, (2004), 15

<sup>909</sup> Baines, South Africa’s Vietnam?, 15

<sup>910</sup> Coker, *South Africa’s Security*, 45. See Crawford, *The Domestic Consequences*, 27

<sup>911</sup> *Ibid.*, 44

<sup>912</sup> M.Verbaak, “Mutiny as troops say no to Angola”, *The Weekly Mail*, 20 - 26 November 1987



“To go and fight Swapo in Angola is a crime against our society. To go and fight against Fapla in their own country is a fight against God’s will.”<sup>913</sup>

Opposition to the war in Angola began in the 1970s and continued into the 1980s. SADF soldiers publicly expressed ethical and political rejection of South African intervention in Angola, and the system of apartheid. Opposition to apartheid was Lieutenant Ivan Toms’ justification for his refusal to continue serving in the SADF: “To put on this brown uniform [of the SADF] is to identify with that system, to be part of apartheid.”<sup>914</sup> David Kimber, active in the End Conscription Campaign, publicly denounced the SADF role Namibia: “It was clear from my experience that the SADF was seen as a foreign force, a colonizing force that was not contributing to any peaceful process.”<sup>915</sup> A poem written by an unknown soldier echoed and captured Kimber’s sense of alienation from the local population:

This foreign land,  
where a white boy  
on white sand  
listens –  
to the clicking tongue  
of a foreign people  
saying –  
Bwana, go home...<sup>916</sup>

Perhaps, Mark Patrick, whose brother was killed in Angola, gave the strongest denunciation:

One of the tragedies was I know what my brother was like. But he  
died fighting for the South African Defence Force. And the way I

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<sup>913</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>914</sup> Bravo, *After the Battle*

<sup>915</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>916</sup> Baines, *South Africa’s Vietnam?*, 14



saw my involvement in the SADF, and the way I would see his involvement in the SADF, and what we were doing, and what he was doing in Angola, most Angolans and most South Africans would call terrorist actions.<sup>917</sup>

The military setbacks in southern Angola in 1987-88 led to further deterioration of SADF morale. Several SADF soldiers testified to this, stating unequivocally despite Pretoria's denials, that the SADF had been decisively defeated. David Kimber underscored that the battle of Cuito Cuanavale "was a massive defeat" for the South African armed forces.<sup>918</sup> Andre Zaaiman, a former captain, affirmed that South Africa "lost the war at the battle of Cuito Cuanavale."<sup>919</sup> For Ross Mardon, the SADF defeat was multi-dimensional, as it had been "definitely by far out-gunned, out-maneuvered, out-fought, out-tacticed, out-everything you want to say."<sup>920</sup> These series of battlefield reversals not only conclusively demonstrated the failure of the SADF's Angolan campaign but, also, demoralized many of the soldiers in the field. This was most clearly illustrated by the Cuban air strike against Calueque.

After the Calueque air-raid, the Cubans found scrawled on a wall in Afrikaans either: "MIK 23 sak van die hart", "MIK 23 sake van die hart," or "MIK 23 saak van die hart."<sup>921</sup> It is difficult to determine whether the word is "sak" or sake." Directly underneath was clearly written 27/06/88, unambiguously referring to the June 27, 1988 date of the Cuban air attack. Whether, a South African soldier wrote the message or one of the civilians working at the dam has not been ascertained. Translation has been

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<sup>917</sup> Bravo, *After the Battle*.

<sup>918</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>919</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>920</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>921</sup> The photograph has been reproduced in several Cuban publications.



controversial, as the scrawl appears to be a fragment of a larger message, the rest of which did not survive. This has lent a definite veneer of ambiguity. SADF partisans argue that not only is the scrawl ambiguous, it is gibberish, constituting meaningless graffiti.

The literal English translation is: “MiG-23s bag of (or to) the heart” or “MiG-23s matters of (or to) the heart.” Cubans argue that actual meaning is more accurately rendered as: “The MiG-23s went straight to the heart,” or “The MiG-23s broke our hearts.” This rendering would provide a clear illustration of South African demoralization. The scrawl’s fragmentary and ambiguous nature could be the result of the haste and disorientation that it was written in during of after the air raid. In addition to the scrawl, the Cubans also found the personal diary of an SADF soldier. Written in English, the soldier reflected on his growing disillusionment with the war and a loss of belief that South Africa could match the Cubans in the military sphere.<sup>922</sup> While the scrawl (graffiti?) and the diary may have directly signified the demoralization of only one or two particular soldiers, the suspicion of a general demoralization of SADF personnel is supported by the testimony of other SADF members. Clive Holt wrote that his morale was significantly affected by the Calueque attack: “My patriotic pride was running low and I just wanted to get out of the fucking war and go home.”<sup>923</sup>

The capacity of the SADF to wage war was now seriously compromised. One diplomat summed up the situation, stating that SADF general wanted “to retreat because army morale is a fragile thing and it has taken a big knock at Cuito Cuanavale.”<sup>924</sup> SADF

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<sup>922</sup> Photographs, photocopies and written notes of the diary were not permitted.

<sup>923</sup> Holt, *At Thy Call*, 156

<sup>924</sup> P. Wellman, “A front-line season of disasters for SA”, *The Weekly Mail*, 8-14 July 1988



morale was sufficiently a regime concern that at the 25 July 1988 SCC meeting, Geldenhuys was asked about the level of troop confidence.<sup>925</sup> Coupled with the physical exhaustion and degradation of its best and most seasoned troops, the SADF also faced ongoing psychological deterioration. This further undermined its fighting capability.

## CONCLUSION

The defeat of the SADF at Cuito Cuanavale and the strategic failure on the Namibian border constituted the decisive blow to Pretoria's drive for regional domination. If Cuito Cuanavale is viewed in isolation then what resulted was, as George argues, inconclusive and a "stalemate."<sup>926</sup> However, if the battle is considered within the wider context of the military situation unfolding in southern Angola it is evident it was not a Cuban victory that "was at best ambiguous"<sup>927</sup> but a significant Cuban success, constituting an unambiguous victory for Havana's strategy.

The power relationship between the contending parties had been radically transformed. The United States Defence Intelligence Agency observed that Pretoria was "unable to reassert its military ascendancy in southern Angola."<sup>928</sup> A crucial pillar of the apartheid regime's preservation strategy had failed. It could no longer maintain apartheid by force of arms at home, while simultaneously waging war against its neighbouring countries, particularly Angola. Both sides of the anti-apartheid struggle viewed the battle inside and outside South Africa as organically interconnected. Chapters Five and Six examine the impact on South Africa of the *débâcle* at Cuito Cuanavale and the ensuing military events in southern Angola.

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<sup>925</sup> SVR 13/88, 5, from MoD [Group 6]

<sup>926</sup> *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, pp 213 & 3

<sup>927</sup> *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, pp 277

<sup>928</sup> USDIA *Lessons Learned* (1988), 13 [declassified]



## **CHAPTER FIVE: AFTERMATH: NAMIBIA AND SOUTH AFRICA**

While Pretoria's decision to capture Cuito Cuanavale was a direct product of the pattern of the 1987 military confrontation between the SADF and FAPLA, it was also the logical extension of the ultimate goal of dislodging the MPLA from power and establishing a quasi-vassal state (akin to South West Africa) in southern Angola. As Angola was central to its project of regional hegemony, the opportunity to deal a mortal blow to FAPLA - and by extension to the MPLA - could not be resisted. However, the conflict did not unfold as Pretoria anticipated, resulting in a new alignment of military power in southern Angola. Faced with this new alignment, Pretoria's position as the region's aspiring hegemon was now, at the very least, called seriously into question.

This new alignment had almost immediate implications for South Africa's occupation of Namibia. This chapter begins by examining the influence of the SADF military reversals on South Africa's continuing occupation of Namibia. The questions that pose themselves are: what role did the SADF military defeat in Angola play in the process leading to Namibia's independence, and was it a significant factor? While the war in Angola, as an integral part of the project of establishing regional hegemony, was waged specifically to preserve South Africa's control of Namibia, the military reversals it suffered in Angola are not considered to be the critical factors in a significant section of the body of the literature on Namibian independence. The dominant themes are that the changes in global geopolitics, specifically, U.S. and Soviet diplomacy, and the impact of international economic sanctions created the conditions that were central to the attainment of Namibia's independence. The assumption of power by Mikhail Gorbachev in the former USSR is often seen as a (if not the) key moment, leading to the implementation of a new Soviet foreign policy.



The end of the Cold War resulted in cooperation between the two superpowers. This diplomatic understanding between Moscow and Washington is seen as facilitating the South African government's 'momentous' and 'path breaking decision' to end South African domination of Namibia.<sup>929</sup> With Pretoria determined to ensure a stable country on its frontier, Brian Wood argued that the new Soviet foreign policy alleviated Pretoria's security concerns. Namibian independence was the result of the combined rationality of Pretoria, Washington, and Moscow.<sup>930</sup> Leys and Brown commented, that in the Angolan war "neither side was interested in taking further heavy casualties; the Cubans looked to the Russians, and the Americans looked to the South Africans, to reach a settlement."<sup>931</sup> According to Roger Fieldhouse, with Gorbachev's ascension to power, Pretoria was persuaded "to come to terms with its neighbours because the 'communist threat' was perceived to be much diminished."<sup>932</sup> Heather Deegan argued the stage was set by Washington-Moscow cooperation based on the recognition that: 1. both had interests but not critical interests in the region; 2. neither could mould or control the region as they wished; 3. the regional conflict should be resolved through political means and negotiations; and, 4. both powers needed a non-violent transition from apartheid.<sup>933</sup>

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<sup>929</sup> H. Deegan, *The Politics of the New South Africa: Apartheid and After* (London, 2001), 71-72

<sup>930</sup> B. Wood. Preventing the Vacuum: Determinants of the Namibia Settlement, 742-769 in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 'XVII' (December, 1991), 746-747

<sup>931</sup> C. Leys and S. Brown, ed., *Histories of Namibia: Living through the liberation struggle* (London, 2005), 11

<sup>932</sup> Fieldhouse, *Anti-Apartheid*, 483. See also Boulle *et al.* (1994), 284; P. Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle: The End of Apartheid and the Birth of the New South Africa* (New Jersey, 1998), 71-2.

<sup>933</sup> Deegan, *The Politics of the New South Africa*, 71-2



In these renderings, the military events in Angola were peripheral to the independence of Namibia.

George takes a different tact, arguing that Cuito Cuanavale provided Washington with the opportunity it sought to advance the negotiations to end the conflict. Cuito Cuanavale had become for both Cuba and South Africa “a costly stalemate.”<sup>934</sup> Chester Crocker, the chief U.S. diplomat in Africa, was able to use the Cuban and South Africa desire to extricate themselves from the conflict to broker an agreement. The U.S. negotiating strategy is thus seen as the decisive factor in process that led to Namibian independence.<sup>935</sup> In short, Cuito Cuanavale was a factor that Washington was able to manipulate. However, this chapter will challenge this view by arguing that the military situation in Angola (particularly events in southern Angola subsequent to Cuito Cuanavale) pushed the U.S. to make concessions in its negotiating strategy that it would have otherwise not countenanced. Interestingly, while George asserts that the U.S. seized Cuito Cuanavale as the opportunity to realize its own goals and interests, he does at one point implicitly acknowledge that the change in the military balance of power played a role in pushing the negotiations forward. He noted that the 23 March failure of the SADF attack “could not have come at a better moment for Havana,” as it prepared for its participation in the negotiations.<sup>936</sup>

The events in Angola of 1987 and 1988 had other effects on South Africa. This chapter also examines the economic dimension of the war in Angola within the context of the South African economy. Perhaps, the most interesting and least explored aspect of the conflict was the influence on the South African public. The chapter assesses the

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<sup>934</sup> George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, p 213

<sup>935</sup> Ibid., p 213

<sup>936</sup> Ibid., p 230



extent to which these events reverberated amongst white South Africans, exploring how as part of the ongoing war in Angola, Cuito Cuanavale and its military aftermath affected white attitudes to the “war on the border,” and the various forms of these responses. In the case of non-white South Africans, especially blacks, the impact on the anti-apartheid movement, particularly on the liberation organizations, is discussed.

### **NAMIBIA: WASHINGTON & PRETORIA**

While geographically separate from the Republic of South Africa, Namibia was treated by Pretoria as a *de facto* fifth province. South Africa had occupied Namibia, a former German colony, since 1915. In 1920, the occupation was formalized under a mandate granted by the League of Nations. However, in 1966, the UN revoked South Africa’s mandate, and the UN General Assembly passed several resolutions declaring South Africa’s occupation illegal. On 29 September 1978, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 435, which called for the withdrawal of South African troops, the end of the illegal occupation of Namibia and an UN-supervised transition period followed by free elections leading to Namibian independence. However, despite growing international pressure to relinquish its control of Namibia, Pretoria had strong support from Washington. While the Carter administration had chosen to support the resolution, the election of Ronald Reagan to the U.S. presidency in 1980 ensured that Washington would reverse its policy regarding South Africa’s occupation of Namibia. From its assumption of power in 1981, the Reagan administration rejected Resolution 435.

Reagan’s election heralded a more intimate and deeper cooperative relationship between Washington and Pretoria. The Reagan administration considered its southern African policy as integral to its objective of combating and rolling back Soviet influence and power globally. As Alexander Haig, the U.S. Secretary of State, prepared for his first meeting with South African Foreign Minister Roelof “Pik” Botha, Chester Crocker,



U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, advised him to emphasize the shared strategic concerns that united the Reagan and Botha regimes. In a briefing paper, Crocker wrote that Botha should be assured that the Reagan administration sought “a new era of cooperation, stability and security in the region. We also share their view that the chief threat to the realization of that hope is the presence and influence of the Soviet Union and its allies.”<sup>937</sup>

Haig clearly articulated this coincidence of strategic interests in a 20 May 1981 memorandum to President Reagan, outlining “a new relationship with South Africa based on a realistic appraisal of our mutual interests in the Southern African region...They know that we are determined to roll back Soviet influence throughout the world and in the region.”<sup>938</sup> This continued to be the Reagan administration’s position throughout the 1980s. Crocker summed up this stance when he told *New York Times* correspondent Joseph Lelyveld: “The whites are here to stay and the only way that constructive change can come is through them.”<sup>939</sup> Crocker praised the SADF general staff as “modernizing patriots,” stressing that it was not the U.S. “task to choose between black and white but to defend Western interests...economic, strategic, moral and political.”<sup>940</sup> He went even further in declaring Washington’s ideological affinity and kinship with the apartheid regime: “[h]istorically, South Africa is by its nature a part of

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<sup>937</sup> Quoted in J. E. Davies, *Constructive Engagement? Chester Crocker & American Policy in South Africa, Namibia & Angola, 1981-88*, (Oxford, 2007), 31

<sup>938</sup> Davies, *Constructive Engagement*, 31

<sup>939</sup> J.Lelyveld, *Move Your Shadow: South Africa, Black and White* (London, 1985), 232-233

<sup>940</sup> Ibid.



the U.S.”<sup>941</sup> With South Africa deemed a crucial ally in reducing the Soviet presence in the region, southern Africa became a strategic testing ground for this new aggressive policy of meeting the perceived threat of communist expansion.

The policy of constructive engagement with South Africa directly emerged from the Reagan administration’s aim of not appearing publicly to support the apartheid regime, while, in reality, working closely with the Botha regime.<sup>942</sup> The basis of the policy of ‘constructive engagement’ pursued by the Reagan administration was ensuring that white South Africans controlled “the pace and scope of changes.”<sup>943</sup> This is illustrated by Chester Crocker’s memoirs. Throughout the memoir on U.S. diplomacy in southern Africa (specifically his own role), Crocker stressed the Reagan administration’s efforts to pressure Pretoria to moderate its regional policy and initiate the dismantling of the apartheid system. Yet this portrayal is contradicted not only by the remarks previously quoted but also by an exchange he had in December 1987 with Pieter G. J. Koornhof, the South African Ambassador to the U.S. On 23 December 1987 the U.N. Security Council adopted Resolution 606 condemning the South African invasion of Angola. Before the vote, Crocker informed Koornhof that Pretoria should not be concerned. Even though Washington had to vote for the resolution because South Africa’s invasion had been so flagrant, it would ensure there would be no meaningful sanctions or measures taken against South Africa. Crocker stated that the U.S. had worked to ensure that the resolution remained devoid of any concrete action, telling Koornhof: “The resolution did not contain a call for comprehensive sanctions, and did

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<sup>941</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>942</sup> For a detailed discussion see Davies, *Constructive Engagement*

<sup>943</sup> A. Seidman, *The Roots of the Crisis in Southern Africa* (New Jersey, 1985), 91



not provide for any assistance to Angola. That was no accident, but a consequence of our own efforts to keep the resolution within bounds.”<sup>944</sup> Senator Edward Kennedy summed up the Reagan administration’s stance on South Africa in an 18 November 1988 letter to Bernard Judels, a white South African who had written to him opposing economic sanctions. Kennedy replied that:

[instead of] working with other nations to develop a concerted approach to South Africa, the Administration has actually worked to defeat such efforts. On 20 February 1987 and 8 March 1988, the United States vetoed resolution [*sic*] in the United Nations Security Council that would have imposed economic sanctions against South Africa.<sup>945</sup>

Washington’s support extended to opposition to forcing Pretoria to accede to U.N. Security Resolution 435. For example, on 9 April 1987, the U.S. vetoed a proposed U.N. Security Council Resolution that would have imposed comprehensive mandatory sanctions against South Africa and declaring its occupation of Namibia a violation of international law and a “serious threat to international peace and security.”<sup>946</sup> In 1987, Edward Perkins, the U.S. ambassador to South Africa clearly communicated this unequivocal support when he informed the Botha regime of the Reagan administration’s “implacable hostility” to Namibian independence.<sup>947</sup> Instead, the U.S. adopted a policy

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<sup>944</sup> *Secretary of State to American Embassy, Pretoria, Dec. 5 1987*, Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) quoted in Piero Gleijeses, “Moscow’s Proxy? Cuba and Africa 1975-1988,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, ‘VIII’ (2006), 132; P. Gleijeses, Cuito Cuanavale Revisted, *Mail & Guardian*, 11 July 2007

<sup>945</sup> E. Kennedy, Letter to Bernard Judels, *South African Department of Foreign Affairs Archives*, 18 November 1988

<sup>946</sup> Text calling for comprehensive mandatory sanctions against South Africa vetoed after discussion in eight meetings, *UN Chronicle*, XXIV (1987), 22

<sup>947</sup> Perkins [*Embajador de los Estados Unidos en Pretoria*] to Sec State, 17 de abril de 1987, FOIA, quoted in Peiro Gleijeses, El ‘verdadero’ Fidel Castro (según Leyester Coltman), *Temas*, N<sup>os</sup>. 41-42, enero-junio, 2005, 182



linking Namibian independence to the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola, resisting any efforts to impose sanctions on Pretoria.

### **NAMIBIA: THE NEGOTIATIONS**

The U.S. policy of linking Namibian independence to the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola also included refusal to grant any official role for Cuba in the diplomatic process. When negotiations began in June 1987 between the U.S. and Angola about ending the ongoing conflict, the U.S. rejected the proposal that Cuba be part of the negotiations. The Botha regime adamantly stated that it would not participate in negotiations until all Cuban troops had completely withdrawn from Angola. It wanted to ensure that any process leading to Namibian independence would be under its control. *The Economist* noted that Pretoria would only allow Namibian independence if it “kept control both of the mineral wealth and of its geostrategic utility.”<sup>948</sup> Meaningful negotiations seemed a very distant prospect, with *The Economist* asserting that due to this South African approach “hopes for change in southern Africa by peaceful means seem to have gone out the window.”<sup>949</sup> In August 1987, Luanda put forward to the U.S. and through them to South Africa, a proposal to establish an agreement that would lead to the withdrawal of Cuban troops and the implementation of Resolution 435. Pretoria rejected Luanda’s overture. In September 1987 the SADF intervened in Angola.

While Pretoria refused to participate in any negotiations, Washington’s objection to any Cuban role changed towards acquiescence. On 28 January 1988, Washington acceded to Havana’s participation, with the Cubans joining the Angolan delegation’s discussions with the U.S in Lusaka. What led to this change in Washington’s position? In

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<sup>948</sup> “Pliant, eh? Namibia”, *The Economist*, 22 August 1987

<sup>949</sup> *Ibid.*



1986, William Minter envisaged that any shift in Washington's stance would be integrally linked to a transformation of the fortunes of the contending forces in the region: "The future course of US policy will depend in large part on the balance of forces in the conflicts in southern Africa itself..."<sup>950</sup> This proved a prescient observation. Concern about the dangers of a regional conflagration provided the impetus for Washington to ask Havana to formally join the discussions. Crocker identified the military events, particularly the Cuban buildup in southern Angola as the decisive new factors. As previously noted, SADF Major General Thirion and Colonel Breytenbach both observed that the Reagan administration had become gravely concerned about Angolan military developments, jostled into action by the resultant "shock waves"<sup>951</sup> and rising regional "temperature."<sup>952</sup>

Given Cuba's military formidable military deployment, Washington decided that Havana now needed to be given a formal role in the talks. As substantial reinforcements poured into Angola at the end of 1987, Washington decided that it needed to deescalate the situation. In his memoirs, Crocker stated that the negotiating process was at an impasse in 1987 until "the great turning point in the long history of the Namibian and Angola conflicts."<sup>953</sup> This great turning point, according to Crocker, was the defeat inflicted on FAPLA by the SADF and "the impact of these developments on the Cubans

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<sup>950</sup> W. Minter, *Destructive Engagement: The United States and South Africa in the Reagan Era*, 281- 320 in P. Johnson and D. Martin (eds.), *Destructive Engagement; Southern Africa at War* (Harare, 1986), 319

<sup>951</sup> Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, 317

<sup>952</sup> Interview with Major General Chris Thirion

<sup>953</sup> Crocker, *High Noon In Southern Africa*, 361



and the Cuban response to them.”<sup>954</sup> However, while Washington reversed its previous position on Cuban exclusion from the talks, Pretoria still refused to participate.

The Botha regime viewed the negotiations as a means by which SWAPO would assume power, ending South African control of Namibia, which would render the apartheid state vulnerable to external subversion. Pretoria was determined to exclude SWAPO from state power. A SWAPO government, *The Independent* opined “would be an anathema to the South African military, whose officers are in no mood to hand Namibia over to the guerrillas.”<sup>955</sup> As outlined in Chapter One, the war in Angola was an essential component of Pretoria’s strategy to maintain its occupation of Namibia. Control of southern Angola was necessary for Pretoria to ensure that Namibia was a “pliable neighbour.”<sup>956</sup>

In March 1988, as the battle for Cuito Cuanavale was still unfolding and the Cubans were two weeks into their drive to the Namibian border, *The New York Times* stated that “several analysts in and out of government contend that South Africa has little interest in pursuing negotiations that would result in ceding control of Namibia.”<sup>957</sup> Before and during the battle, the SADF command was emphatic that it was “not going to let go of Namibia.”<sup>958</sup> An unnamed U.S. official was quoted as saying “[t]he internal domestic politics make it very difficult for [the South Africans]... [Botha] would be

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<sup>954</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>955</sup> T. Allen-Mills, “South Africans relax in Ovambo”, *The Independent*, 24 March 1988

<sup>956</sup> “Angola’s deadly stalemate”, *The Economist*, 27 February 1988

<sup>957</sup> N. A. Lewis, “Southern Africa Diplomacy Seen at Impasse”, *New York Times*, 23 March 1988

<sup>958</sup> P. Van Niekerk, “What Malan really meant: We’ll put a pro-SA regime in Luanda”, *The Weekly Mail*, 11-17 March 1988, 7



afraid of being accused by far-right wing opponents of selling out Namibia.”<sup>959</sup> The growing and continued Cuban military presence in Angola was viewed as unacceptable and a threat that had to be countered by a demonstration of South African strength. As the Cuban armed forces massed on the Namibian border, meeting this threat was viewed as a paramount task of the apartheid state.

That this was a pervasive concern of Pretoria and of the entire diplomatic corps was illustrated by C. A. Basson, vice-consul of the South African Embassy in Japan, who in a letter to the editor of the *Asahi Evening News* (Japan) argued “the continued presence of 40,000 Cuban troops and military advisers from the East Bloc countries threatens the legitimate security interests of South Africa.”<sup>960</sup> Basson’s letter represented the preoccupation that now gripped the Botha regime. In a 2 May 1988 statement before the South African parliament, President Botha declared that before his government would accept Namibian independence “[t]he Cubans must go.”<sup>961</sup>

Nevertheless, despite these protestations, Pretoria joined the London round of negotiations on 3-4 May 1988.<sup>962</sup> However, as the negotiations progressed, South Africa continued to reject Resolution 435 and demand that Cuban troops must leave Angola before it would countenance Namibian independence. Despite this intransigence, the government faced heavy criticism for even entering the negotiations, which the extreme

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<sup>959</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>960</sup> C. A. Basson, “S. Africa Welcomes Aid”, *Asahi Evening News* (Japan), 11 April 1988

<sup>961</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, 2 May 1988, 8467; R. Pear, “Four nations to Discuss Withdrawal of Outside Forces from Angola”, *New York Times*, 30 April 1988; and “Cuban forces more near Namibian border as talks start”, *Washington Times*, 3 May 1988

<sup>962</sup> The question of why Pretoria reversed its previous position, joining the negotiations, is taken up later.



nationalist sector viewed as an unacceptable concession by Pretoria. Dr. A. P. Treurnicht, the leader of the Conservative Party and the official opposition, unambiguously articulated this stance, challenging Foreign Minister Botha on the character of the ongoing negotiations: "I have the resolution here. I should like to ask whether it is possible that even the government, let alone those who disagree with it, could have agreed to each of these items."<sup>963</sup> Treurnicht then accused Botha of dissembling: "He cannot look us in the face, because we would tell him that he is not telling the whole truth."<sup>964</sup>

Despite this exchange, Pretoria appeared intractable on Resolution 435 as the vehicle for Namibian independence. Foreign Minister Botha declared that there would be "no talks if Cuban troops continued to advance."<sup>965</sup> A 17 May editorial in the South African newspaper *The Star* stated that the South African position remained "hardline and unyielding."<sup>966</sup> On 24-25 June 1988, Foreign Minister Botha, during the Cairo round, participated for the first time in the negotiations. However, he still insisted on the complete withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola as the necessary precondition before Pretoria would withdraw its forces from Namibia and before any substantive agreement could be made on that country's independence.<sup>967</sup> Crocker noted that the South African demands represented a "lack of candor and realism at the top of the

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<sup>963</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, 16 May 1988, 9781

<sup>964</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>965</sup> "No talks if troops advance", *The Star*, 16 May 1988; See also "Some more rivers to cross", *The Star*, 17 May 1988

<sup>966</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>967</sup> Crocker, *High Noon In Southern Africa*, 428



South African leadership about what it could obtain at the bargaining table.”<sup>968</sup> Crocker’s criticism reflected Washington’s concerns about whether Cuba intended to invade Namibia. Major western newspapers also singled out South African intractability, noting that Namibian independence was unpalatable to many in the Botha regime. Writing in *The New York Times*, Bernard Trainor noted that the task confronting Neil Van Heerden, the head of the South African negotiating team, was “selling it [Namibian independence] to P.W. Botha and the security establishment.”<sup>969</sup> *The Christian Science Monitor* noted that even as the concept of Namibia’s independence was gradually being accepted there continued to be “significant opposition in South Africa’s military and elsewhere in the government to pulling out of Namibia.”<sup>970</sup> South African commentators, Phillip Van Niekerk and Mark Verbaan, agreed with *The Christian Science Monitor* that Pretoria’s negotiators had to “face their biggest hurdle: convincing their bosses to accept these principles. The big question now is whether the South Africa government - and particularly the militarily-dominated State Security Council - will go along with the process.”<sup>971</sup>

Several articles singled out the linkage between Pretoria’s control of Namibia and the security of the apartheid state. One South African general declared: “We would

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<sup>968</sup> *Ibid.*, 427

<sup>969</sup> B. E. Trainor, “South Africa’s Strategy in Angola Falls Short, Enhancing Cubans’ Role”, *New York Times*, 12 July 1988

<sup>970</sup> E. A. Wayne, “US Officials hail new give and take in talks on southern Africa”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 15 July 1988; “4 Powers Meet to Explore ways to End Angola war”, *New York Times*, 4 May 1988

<sup>971</sup> P. Van Niekerk and M. Verbaan, “This Road to Peace”, *The Weekly Mail*, 15 - 21 July 1988



rather fight in Ovamboland than along the Orange River.”<sup>972</sup> A *Times* article argued that many in the Botha regime feared the repercussions inside South Africa, arguing “[t]hat an agreement to pull-out of Angola and grant independence to Namibia would send a signal to radical black groups in South Africa, currently in a demoralized state, that white power was once more on the retreat...”<sup>973</sup> *The Economist* noted the fear of the emergence of an unfriendly Namibia, stating that “[m]any white South Africans hate the idea of an independent Namibia, where SWAPO would quite likely win a free election.”<sup>974</sup>

However, the Botha regime’s hardline position began to soften. During the 11-13 July round of talks in New York City, South Africa began to retreat from its position that there had to be a total withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola before the SADF would leave both Angola and Namibia. The 22-28 July issue of *The Weekly Mail* captured the general perception that a sudden and significant change had occurred in Pretoria’s position. What had seemed to be an improbable (if not impossible) outcome now appeared on the verge of realization:

If South Africa is indeed committed to the current peace talks with Angola and Cuba, President PW Botha must be thinking seriously about the possibility of a President Sam Nujoma in Windhoek. The possibility seemed so startling yesterday that pro-independence Namibians were not yet popping the champagne corks after the news of an agreed ‘set of principles’ for a sub-continental settlement. If Botha has accepted the possibility of a President Nujoma, one can begin to think the unthinkable: a majority government in an independent Namibia...<sup>975</sup>

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<sup>972</sup> B. E. Trainor, “South Africa’s Strategy in Angola Falls Short, Enhancing Cubans’ Role”, *New York Times*, 12 July 1988

<sup>973</sup> “Botha plays waiting game on accord”, *The Times*, 15 July 1988

<sup>974</sup> “It’s starting to sound likely: South Africa”, *The Economist*, 30 July 1988

<sup>975</sup> S. Johnson and M. Verbaan, “And now SA...President Nujoma?” *The Weekly Mail*, 22 – 28 July 1988



The 11-13 July round of talks was followed by the 2-5 August meeting in Geneva, in which Pretoria fully accepted Resolution 435. That the Botha regime had radically retreated from positions that it had previously deemed to be non-negotiable was demonstrated by its efforts to defend the agreement that had been reached. The 25 July SSC meeting presaged this radical change in Pretoria's position. Botha acknowledged that the South African occupation of Namibia was no longer sustainable: "South Africa can no longer stay involved in SWA [South West Africa] on the current basis" and "should be reconsidered."<sup>976</sup> Geldenhuys, at the 8 August 1988 SSC meeting that followed the Geneva round, pointed out that in response to "South African concessions, Cuba was willing to pull back from the border."<sup>977</sup> The SCC then agreed to finalize the Geneva agreement, withdraw its remaining troops from Angola and implement Resolution 435.<sup>978</sup> The 22 August 1988 SSC meeting decided to accept the finalized Geneva Protocol that enshrined Resolution 435 as the framework for Namibian independence.<sup>979</sup>

In the 24 August 1988 joint sitting of the South African Parliament, entitled "Peace Negotiation on South West Africa," the Conservative Party (CP) put the Botha government on the defensive. In response, the government adopted the unusual stance of both condemning and justifying the acceptance of Resolution 435. President Botha described "as the most farcical opinion ever" the ruling by the International Court at The

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<sup>976</sup> SVR 13/88, p 6, from MoD [Group 6]

<sup>977</sup> SVR 14/88, p 4, from MoD [Group 6]

<sup>978</sup> Ibid., 4 & 5-6

<sup>979</sup> SVR 15/88, 5, from MoD [Group 6]



Hague (which laid the legal basis for Resolution 435) that the South African occupation of Namibia was illegal.<sup>980</sup> This did not, of course, exempt the government from sharp attacks from nationalist circles, led by the CP parliamentary opposition. Dr. Treurnicht took the government to task, declaring that given:

the price in the form of the lives of hundreds of young men and millions of rands in South West Africa, the obvious justifiable questions are, amongst others, the following: Was it a futile exercise? Of what use has it been to us? Have we been humiliated? Could we have done anything to check the communist influence and expansion of power?<sup>981</sup>

Treurnicht then painted the negotiation process as an extension of communist aggression, arguing that to “promote expansionism...and achieve the goal of the revolution, Russia and Cuba have had to decide on one of two alternatives...A political method or the military option...”<sup>982</sup> Dr. Ferdinand Hartzenberg, another CP representative, was blunter in his censure:

I am afraid that this peace plan represents peace which stems from capitulation because the peace plan loads the scale overwhelmingly in favour of the communist to help Swapo win the election...These matters have consequences for South Africa...This does not discourage South Africa’s enemies. This instils new fire and enthusiasm into the enemies of this country. In addition, South Africa is left in a weaker diplomatic position than it was in previously. The renewed pressure on South Africa is increasing.<sup>983</sup>

Hartzenberg went even further in his condemnation, describing the agreement as “not a peace plan; it is a plan to destroy South Africa.”<sup>984</sup> Despite Botha’s excoriation of the

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<sup>980</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, 24 August 1988, 15502

<sup>981</sup> *Ibid.*, 15511

<sup>982</sup> *Ibid.*, 15513

<sup>983</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, 24 August 1988, 15542 & 15544

<sup>984</sup> *Ibid.*, 15546



International Court and Treurnicht's biting criticism, Defence Minister Malan acknowledged and defended the decision to accept Resolution 435, arguing that that it was now a *fait accompli*: "The possibility of implementing Resolution 435 is a fact."<sup>985</sup> He argued that the agreement was a favourable one, as it would lead to the removal of Cuban troops from the region. Malan endeavoured to satisfy nationalist circles and ally their concerns by fulminating against those who accused Pretoria of "giving South West Africa away or selling out."<sup>986</sup>

By 25 August 1988, all South African troops in Angola had been pulled back into Namibia, while Cuban troops still remained massed on the Namibian border. The negotiating process then shifted to the implementation process, centred on timetables for Cuban and South African troop withdrawals. Eventually the negotiating process resulted in the New York Accords of 22 December 1988, directly leading to Namibia's independence. The Accords established the framework for the implementation of Resolution 435, setting the timetable for Cuban withdrawal from Angola and United Nations supervised elections in 1990. They went into effect on 1 April 1989 and culminated on 21 March 1990 with SWAPO's decisive victory in the elections. Under the terms of the agreement, Cuban troops began withdrawing from Angola in April 1989, completing the process in July 1990.

#### **WHY DID SOUTH AFRICA CONCEDE NAMIBIAN INDEPENDENCE?**

In the end, the Botha regime accepted conditions that previously it had adamantly rejected: the withdrawal of the SADF from Angola and Namibia and implementation of Resolution 435 *before* Cuban troops were withdrawn from Angola. What accounts for this remarkable about-face? Pretoria's retreat from its previous positions happened in the

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<sup>985</sup> *Ibid.*, 15566

<sup>986</sup> *Ibid.*



period after the 24-25 June round of negotiations in Cairo. It was in this period, on 27 June, that Cuba staged the successful air-raid on Calueque, demonstrating that the balance of military power had shifted significantly against the SADF. Particularly with respect to the deployment of air power, the SADF was no longer able to compete with the Cuban and Angolan armed forces. As explored in Chapter Four, the Botha regime perceived that it faced a serious, if not insurmountable, threat from the Cuban forces in southern Angola.

Pretoria understood that the balance of power on the ground in Angola would dictate the course of the negotiations. Geldenhuys acknowledged this when he publicly stated that in assessing the military situation, “[t]he point is how does it affect the negotiations.”<sup>987</sup> Jorge Risquet, a leading Cuban negotiator summed up the situation:

As you know very well, what is decisive in negotiations is the relationship of forces on the ground, independent of the brilliance of this or that negotiator. And given the arrogance of the South Africans, one thing was clear. If they crushed the Angolan forces at Cuito Cuanavale, they would have demanded nothing less than Angola’s full surrender at the negotiating table. With the defeat of the South Africans at Cuito Cuanavale, the situation changed in our favour, so that we were the ones negotiating from a strong position...<sup>988</sup>

The 25 July 1988 SSC discussions, where Botha declared that the South African occupation of Namibia was no longer viable, encapsulated the dilemma that faced Pretoria. The major preoccupation was the military situation. While a number of inter-related factors were presented, considerable time was spent discussing the Cuban forces in Angola. As mentioned in Chapter Four, Botha identified the military situation “as the

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<sup>987</sup> “Cubans, Swapo are reinforced”, *The Sowetan*, 10 June 1988

<sup>988</sup> Risquet, *Defeating the South Africans*, 32



worst that Republic of South Africa has recently faced.”<sup>989</sup> He then added that under the prevailing circumstances South Africa could no longer carry the financial burden of defending Namibia, nor was he willing to risk the considerable loss of life that would result if they attempted to challenge the Cubans in Angola. He also acknowledged the lack of support inside Namibia for South Africa by noting the refusal of Namibians to fight SWAPO. The discussion of the economic cost of occupying Namibia and the lack of support for the repression of SWAPO was sandwiched between two analyses of the Cuban threat.<sup>990</sup> As mentioned in Chapter Four, Botha wanted to avoid a military confrontation, which would only be countenanced “if there was no alternative.”<sup>991</sup>

Justified or not, this perception (fear) profoundly shaped the actions of the apartheid state. The defeat of the SADF exposed the severe limitations of the South African armed forces. The SADF was an integral element of the State of Emergency, declared in 1986 and extended in 1987. The SADF was not only deployed outside of South Africa’s borders; it was often supplementing the internal security forces, especially the SAP, in the policing and suppression of the townships. For example, 35,000 soldiers were deployed in 96 townships in operations of eviction, school occupations and strike-breaking. The close cooperation between the SADF and the SAP “was an important indication of the level of violent conflict and the role of the SADF within that conflict.”<sup>992</sup> Pretoria deemed the deployment of the SADF in townships as

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<sup>989</sup> SVR 13/88, 6, from MoD [Group 6]

<sup>990</sup> SVR 13/88, 5-7, from MoD [Group 6]

<sup>991</sup> SVR 13/88, 6, from MoD [Group 6]

<sup>992</sup> J. Cock, *The Role of Violence in Current State Security Strategies*, in M. Swilling (ed), *Views on the South African State* (Pretoria, 1990), 88; Interview with Patrick Ricketts



indispensable to national security. W.N. Breytenbach, Deputy-Minister of Defence, defended the presence of the SADF in Black communities as necessary to South African development and the prevention of revolution:

We cannot have development unless we first establish stability, and the presence of the Defence Force in Black residential areas, in support of the SA [*sic*] police, is helping to achieve that state of stability. There is a revolutionary onslaught in South Africa...The people who object to this are objecting to the order the SA [*sic*] Defence Force is striving to maintain.<sup>993</sup>

However, Pretoria could no longer simultaneously wage war in Angola and police the townships, as it no longer had the military capacity to do both. Michael Young, an adviser to the South African government, stated that the SADF command asserted it no longer had the capacity to carry on military operations simultaneously outside and inside the country. Overstretched, the SADF faced a stark choice: it “could either continue the war and patrol South Africa’s borders, or police the townships, but not both.”<sup>994</sup> This was also Havana’s estimation. They concluded that as a direct result of having to meet the Cuban military threat, South Africa did not have the forces to simultaneously wage war in Angola and Namibia, while containing internal rebellion. Castro argued that any diversion of troops from one theatre of action would redound to the significant detriment of the other:

South African government could only maintain its illegal occupation of South West Africa if it moved two army divisions from the townships and it could not do that without leaving the way open for the ANC to advance. It had to make a critical strategic choice, therefore, and it chose to leave South West Africa and agree to the formation of Namibia as a newly independent state.<sup>995</sup>

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<sup>993</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, 16 May 1988, 9911-9912

<sup>994</sup> Quoted in Harvey, *The Fall of Apartheid*, 213

<sup>995</sup> Vic Allen, *My Secret Mission*, 16



Contemporary accounts directly connect the end of South Africa's intractability in the negotiations to the changing military situation in Angola, specifically Cuito Cuanavale and its aftermath. Jorge Risquet, one of Cuba's chief negotiators argued that the situation on the Namibian border broke the impasse: "In the past few months there has been an accelerated change in the situation, both politically and militarily. The presence of a strong group of Cubans in Southern Angola has been decisively instrumental in the negotiations."<sup>996</sup> This was not merely the biased and partisan view from one belligerent. For example, in its 12 December 1988 report the United States Defence Intelligence Agency analyzed the SADF's military reversal as critical in undermining the Botha regime's opposition to Namibian independence: "South Africa concerned with the deployment of Cuban troops on the southwest in early 1988, now proved interested in Cuba's willingness to consider withdrawing its forces in exchange for implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 435."<sup>997</sup> The Agency went further by ascribing a decisive role to the Cuban military intervention in the process leading the signing of the New York Accords. In its view the demonstration of Cuban military might had "provided new impetus to peace negotiations and resulted in the 1988 accords among South Africa, Angola and Cuba."<sup>998</sup> Faced with an increasingly untenable military situation, the Botha regime was forced first to the negotiating table and then, second, to make concessions that it had previously deemed unacceptable.

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<sup>996</sup> P. Van Niekerk, "Angola: Tough problem of selling peace to the bosses", *The Weekly Mail*, 15 - 21 July 1988

<sup>997</sup> USDIA *Lessons Learned* (12 December 1988), 16

<sup>998</sup> USDIA *Lessons Learned* (12 December 1988), 16-17



Several influential western newspapers evaluations coincided with that of the now-declassified 12 December 1988 USDIA report. Numerous contemporary reports consistently attributed Pretoria's pliability in the negotiations to the military developments in Angola. On 12 July, *The New York Times* noted: "South Africa has also come under increasing military and political pressure to end the war and grant independence to Namibia."<sup>999</sup> In that issue, *The New York Times* also published a report from its South African correspondent, Bernard Trainor, emphasizing South Africa's military insecurity:

South Africa's military strategy in Angola appears to have backfired, placing the Pretoria government in an uncomfortable bargaining position in the latest round of talks on the Angolan conflict. And the South Africans are finding their image of invincibility in southern Africa challenged by the Cuban forces allied with the Angolan government. Some South Africans now fear that the Cubans have the military advantage along the border between Angola and South-West Africa, the South African administered territory also known as Namibia.<sup>1000</sup>

Other prominent newspapers highlighted the military situation as crucial in determining the tenor and direction of the talks. For example, *The Christian Science Monitor* interpreted the Cuban deployment along the Namibian border as giving "South Africa more incentive to negotiate."<sup>1001</sup> *The Washington Post* noted that the Cuban armed forces had driven the SADF "back toward South African-controlled Namibia. Since then, [Cuban] government officials have been able to argue that Cuba could negotiate its troop

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<sup>999</sup> F. Butterfield, "Talks to End the war in Angola Are Resumed on Governors Island", *New York Times*, 12 July 1988

<sup>1000</sup> B. E. Trainor, "South Africa's Strategy in Angola Falls Short, Enhancing Cubans' Role", *New York Times*, 12 July 1988

<sup>1001</sup> E. A. Wayne, "US Officials hail new give and take in talks on southern Africa", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 15 July 1988



withdrawal from a position of military strength.”<sup>1002</sup> This was amplified in another *New York Times* report that stated “[t]he reputation of the South African Army as an invincible force has been challenged by the war along the Angolan-Namibian border.”<sup>1003</sup> *The Economist* argued that the regime turned to negotiations on Namibian independence in order to ameliorate the consequences of the military failure, stating that Pretoria’s decision to withdraw from Angola and promise to follow suit in Namibia owed “much to the failure of South Africa’s campaign there [Angola] last winter.”<sup>1004</sup>

As the negotiations crystallized into the agreement leading to the implementation of Resolution 435, the centrality of the conflict in Angola to Namibia’s independence was repeatedly underscored. *The Economist* noted that “[o]nly a year ago South Africa troops were advancing deep into Angola.”<sup>1005</sup> As the date for Namibia’s independence approached this position was reaffirmed by several newspaper commentaries. The *Chicago Tribune* published an opinion piece by William Minter, a specialist on southern Africa, arguing it was the “military situation above all, that accelerated the pace of negotiations” that led to Namibia’s independence.<sup>1006</sup> The *Financial Times* published a chronology of events leading up to the negotiations that highlighted Cuito Cuanavale.<sup>1007</sup>

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<sup>1002</sup> J. Presto, “Long Official Silence is Ending on Cuba’s ‘Faraway War’”, *Washington Post*, 2 August 1988

<sup>1003</sup> B. E. Trainor, “South Africans Lose Reputation of Invincibility”, *New York Times*, 24 August 1988; M. Hornsby, “South Africa agrees ceasefire with Angola and Cubans”, *The Times*, 9 August 1988; *The Economist*, 3 September 1988 (untitled)

<sup>1004</sup> “The struggle behind South Africa’s smile”, *The Economist*, 17 September 1988

<sup>1005</sup> “The peace habit reaches Africa”, *The Economist*, 19 November 1988

<sup>1006</sup> W. Minter, “Southern Africa: Sustaining the peace momentum”, *Chicago Tribune*, 11 January 1989

<sup>1007</sup> “A Chronology Of The Angolan Conflict”, *Financial Times*, 24 June 1989



Cuito Cuanavale figured even more prominently in a chronology published by *The Independent*, which directly coupled the military outmaneuvering of South Africa with Namibian independence.<sup>1008</sup> An editorial in the *San Francisco Chronicle* was even more explicit, declaring: “The defeat at the hands of the Cubans and Angolans forced Botha to sign the New York Accord of Dec. 22, 1988, requiring South Africa to pull its troops out of Angola and Namibia.”<sup>1009</sup>

Perhaps an editorial cartoon published in the December 1988 issue of *The Weekly Mail* gave the most poignant statement. It depicted South Africa’s Foreign Minister Botha being forced at gunpoint to sign the agreement on Namibian independence. In the sketch, Fidel Castro holds a pistol to the head of a cringing Botha. As Botha signs the agreement, he declares: “30 years of conflict and NOW I see the light at the end of the barrel!”<sup>1010</sup> The intended interpretation was quite unambiguous and unequivocal: Pretoria acquiesced to Namibian independence because of its military defeat by the Cuban armed forces.

Sharing this assessment from different vantage points were four intimate witnesses. SADF Colonel Gerhard Louw, leader of the last assault on Cuito Cuanavale, stated that the military events in Angola pushed Pretoria to concede Namibia’s independence, noting that while “South Africa was preparing to come to an agreement on Namibian independence...all this could not be done until the military adventures in

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<sup>1008</sup> “Violent birth pangs of a nation”, *The Independent*, 20 March 1990

<sup>1009</sup> K. Danaher, “Why South Africa’s de Klerk Had to Push Reforms”, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 February 1990

<sup>1010</sup> “Derek Bauer’s World”, *The Weekly Mail*, 15-22 December 1988



Angola were ended.”<sup>1011</sup> In 1988, before the negotiations had culminated in the signing of the New York Accords on 22 December, Richard Bloomfield, a U.S. diplomat, wrote: “It is ironic that if the U.S.-brokered settlement comes into effect, it will be in large measure due to the fighting ability of the very Cuban forces that the United States insisted for so long were the chief obstacle to such an agreement...”<sup>1012</sup>

While the pitfalls of a mono-causal argument are obvious, the documentary evidence strongly points to the conclusion that the Cuban military *coup de main* was the central factor leading to the New York Accords. The testimony of key participants in and observers of the negotiation process leading to Namibian independence assign a central role, if not the central role, to the military developments, arguing that the Cuban intervention had qualitatively transformed the situation. South Africa’s occupation of Namibia and refusal to implement Resolution 435 may have proven to be unsustainable in the long term. Nevertheless, Resolution 435’s implementation and the attainment of Namibian independence occurred precisely in the 1988-1990 period, as opposed to any other period, as a direct result of the military events in Angola. As illustrated in Chapter One, this is not a novel assertion. The connection between the war in Angola and Namibian independence has been made numerous times. The contribution of this discussion is to adduce new evidence to support the conclusion that the military events in Angola were central to the attainment of Namibia’s independence.

## **THE ECONOMY: IMPACT OF MILITARISATION**

The militarization of the apartheid regime led to the expansion of the military both in its actual size and financial expenditure. Between 1975 and 1989, the SADF more than

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<sup>1011</sup> Interview with Gerhard Louw

<sup>1012</sup> R. Bloomfield (ed.), *Regional Conflicts and US Policy: Angola and Mozambique*, (Michigan, 1988), 220



doubled its number of troops: from 50,000 to 103,000.<sup>1013</sup> Also, compulsory national service in the armed forces for South African white males was increased to two years (from one). There was a parallel increase in the size of the armed forces' reserves and the Citizen Force, a separate institution that supplemented the professional and permanent SADF troops. By the late 1980s, the reserves had increased to 140,000, while the Citizen Force had grown by 325,000.<sup>1014</sup>

Together the SADF reserves and the Citizen Force could mobilize between 500,000 to 600,000 men. Also, during this period non-white recruitment into the SADF increased. In the mid-1980s an estimated 24 per cent of the SADF troops were non-white. The non-white recruitment was deemed necessary by the Ministry of Defence as the SADF had to expand in order to meet the demands of "total strategy" combined with the impact on South Africa's economy of militarization. The 1986 White Paper on Defence stated "white males can no longer bear the security burden alone without harming the economy."<sup>1015</sup> However, the bulk of the SADF, especially its core fighting troops, remained white.

Calculating the economic costs of an expanded SADF is difficult because official figures that were released by the Botha regime on military spending do not include the costs, for example, of land for bases and training, fuel, supplies and "conscription and

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<sup>1013</sup> See *The Military Balance, 1974-1975* (London, 1974), 44; *The Military Balance, 1988-1989* (London, 1988), 139

<sup>1014</sup> See International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 1989-90*, (London, 1990), 140; M. Phillips, The Nuts and Bolts of Military Power: The Structure of the SADF, in J. Cock and L. Nathan (eds.), *Society at War: The Militarisation of South Africa* (New York, 1989), 16-27

<sup>1015</sup> Republic of South Africa, *White Paper on Defence and Armament Production* (Pretoria, 1986), 17



reserve duty.”<sup>1016</sup> Nevertheless, based on the official released figures, South African expenditure on the military increased dramatically over the course of its military intervention in Angola. The growing financial and material toll of the war is attested to by the increased military budgets. For example, from the period of 1977-78 to 1987-88 the official military budget tripled to 6.684 billion Rand, which consumed 14.7 per cent of the overall budget.<sup>1017</sup> Some estimates put the actual real expenditure on the military at closer to 9 billion, consuming 25-30 per cent of all government spending.<sup>1018</sup> Even when adjusted for inflation — *i.e.*, using the prices for one specific year as the basis for comparison — the rise in military spending is still dramatic. If prices for 1985 are used as the base for comparison and each budget recalculated, from 1975 to 1989, the military budget still increased by 64 per cent: from 3.546 billion Rand to 5.791 billion Rand (based on 1985 prices). Spending per capita had gone from 38 Rand in 1975 to 268 Rand in 1989. Military expenditures now consumed an average of 14 per cent of each annual budget, representing an annual average of 3.5 per cent of South Africa’s gross domestic product.<sup>1019</sup> In 1985, the Anti-Apartheid Movement in Britain estimated that in 1985 the police, army and the security apparatus consumed 40 per cent of the budget.<sup>1020</sup> By 1989

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<sup>1016</sup> S. Archer, Defence expenditures and arms procurement in South Africa, 244-259 in Cock & Nathan, *Society at War*, 245

<sup>1017</sup> See for example: SAIRR *Survey of Race Relations in South Africa 1986/87* (Johannesburg, 1988), 512; and S. Archer, Defence expenditures and arms procurement in South Africa, 244-259 in Cock & Nathan, *Society at War*, 249

<sup>1018</sup> Cock & Nathan, *Society at War*, 245

<sup>1019</sup> P. Batchelor, South Africa’s Arms Industry, 97-121 in J. Cock and P. McKenzie (eds.), *From Defence to Development: Redirecting Military Resources in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1998), 98

<sup>1020</sup> Fieldhouse, *Anti-Apartheid*, 483



the military and other security activities accounted for more than one third of government expenditures.<sup>1021</sup>

As the war escalated during the SADF's drive to capture Cuito Cuanavale and then counter the Cuban build-up on the Namibian border, so did the budget allocation to the military. In 1987-1988, the military budget was 6.7 billion Rand, which was 30 per cent more than in 1987-1988, consuming 14.7 per cent of the overall budget as opposed to 13.7 per cent respectively.<sup>1022</sup> For 1988-1989, the military expenditure rose to 8.2 billion Rand, a 22.4 per cent increase over 1987-1988 and 15 per cent of the entire South African budget. Moreover, in February 1989 the regime allocated an additional 560 million Rand to the SADF to address "the changes in the security situation in Namibia and Angola."<sup>1023</sup>

Pretoria heavily invested in the development of a domestic arms industry. The Armaments Board and the Armaments Development and Production Corporation were merged in 1976 to create the Arms Corporation of South Africa (Armcor). The 1977 *White Paper on Defence* had underscored the need for South Africa to establish its own arms-producing capabilities: "The RSA must, as far as practicable, be self-sufficient in the provision of arms and ensure their continued production."<sup>1024</sup> In 1968 Pretoria had expended 32 million Rand on arms production; in 1978 its investment rose more than 30-

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<sup>1021</sup> *Ibid.*, 483

<sup>1022</sup> SAIRR (South African Institute of Race Relations), *Race Relations Survey 1988/89* (Johannesburg, 1988), 512; *The Military Balance, 1988-1989*, 139

<sup>1023</sup> *Ibid.*, 519. See Crawford, *The Domestic Consequences*, 25-26

<sup>1024</sup> 1977 *White Paper on Defence*, 9. See Crawford, *The Domestic Consequences*, 12



fold to 979 million.<sup>1025</sup> Additionally, a secret government grant of 1.2 billion Rand was given.<sup>1026</sup> Pretoria also expended 700-800 million Rand on its nuclear weapons program.<sup>1027</sup>

The impetus for this dramatic increase in investment in armament manufacture was the international arms embargo imposed in 1977. Pretoria wanted to break or at least mitigate its dependence on external suppliers. Armscor was to be the center of an ever-growing arms producing sector of the South African economy. Eventually more than 2,000 private South Africa companies were involved, employing more than 150,000 people, “as contractors or suppliers of military technology and equipment to SADF.”<sup>1028</sup> Armscor was successful in developing several advanced weapons systems, for example, the G-5 and G-6 155mm artillery cannons.

The G-5s and G-6s were weapons systems that the SADF heavily depended on, and were therefore produced in significant numbers. While the actual size of the production runs is not available, a visit to the military base in Walmansdal (near Pretoria) on 3 August 2006 was revealing. At least 20 G-6s were stored at the base. Despite, being refurbished with 21st century technology, the original manufacture date of 1987 or 1988 was imprinted on the turrets.<sup>1029</sup> The Sgt. Major in charge described Walmansdal as

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<sup>1025</sup> *The Apartheid War Machine: The Strength and Deployment of the South African Armed Forces* (London, 1980), 14

<sup>1026</sup> Batchelor, *South Africa's Arms Industry*, 99

<sup>1027</sup> de Villiers, *Why South Africa Gave Up*, 102

<sup>1028</sup> Batchelor, *South Africa's Arms Industry*, 100-101

<sup>1029</sup> Visit to SANDF Walmansdal Military Base, 3 August 2006



a relatively small storage facility.<sup>1030</sup> Notwithstanding, being a survey of only one military base, the visit provided an indication of the high numbers of G-6s that may have been manufactured.

Armcor was able to attain “a relatively high level of self-sufficiency and could meet most of the equipment requirements for the SADF.”<sup>1031</sup> In 1963, 70 per cent of the military budget was expended on arms acquisition from foreign suppliers; by 1984 less than 10 per cent was spent outside of South Africa.<sup>1032</sup> The only country that South Africa developed an extensive military trading relationship with was Israel. Both countries collaborated extensively on a range of weapon systems, including tanks and fighter aircraft.<sup>1033</sup> Pretoria augmented this collaboration by purchasing substantial materiel from Israel. For example, on 31 March 1975, then-Defence Minister P. W. Botha committed, at least in principle, to buy 1,000 tanks from Israel for \$810,000 US per unit.<sup>1034</sup> In the 1980s, Israeli upgrades to South African military aircraft cost \$2 billion US. Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, the total military trade between Israel and South Africa is estimated to have exceeded \$10 billion US.<sup>1035</sup>

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<sup>1030</sup> Interview with SANDF Sergeant-Major at Walmansdal Military Base, Walmansdal, 3 August 2006. Sergeant Major wished to remain anonymous.

<sup>1031</sup> Batchelor, *South Africa's Arms Industry*, 100

<sup>1032</sup> S. Landgren, *Embargo Disimplemented: South Africa's Military Industry* (London, 1989), 9

<sup>1033</sup> Interview with Chris Thirion; Hamann, *Day of the Generals*, 161. For a detailed discussion see Sasha Polakow-Suransky (2010)

<sup>1034</sup> *Minutes of the Meeting between P. W. Botha Minister of Defence, South Africa and Shimon Peres, Minister of Defence, Israel*, Pretoria, 31 March 1975 [DECLASSIFIED]

<sup>1035</sup> G. Frankel, *Israel's Most Illicit Affair*, *Foreign Policy*, 25 May 2010



The government was often on the defensive as it tried to justify its military spending. In November 1987, Minister of Education Piet Clase defended the South African intervention in Angola, while acknowledging the financial toll: “We have an expensive policy which we all want and for which we are fighting on the borders and for which we are having to endure sanctions.”<sup>1036</sup> As the war continued into 1988, the government faced increasing criticism over the financial cost. The questioning of the war’s increasing cost emanated from supporters of South Africa’s occupation of Namibia and the intervention in Angola. The editors of *Die Vaderland*, the Afrikaner nationalist newspaper, wrote that they estimated that the war cost about 5 million Rands per day.<sup>1037</sup> Jacobus Hercules Van de Merve, of the Conservative Party stated, “rumours have it that the war is terribly expensive. One of the rumours that reached us was that the war has cost in the region of R 2,000 million.”<sup>1038</sup> As would be expected, criticism came from those opposed to the government’s policies. In arguing for the end of the war in Angola and the occupation of Namibia, Pat Thungaval Poovalingam, a Progressive Federal Party member of parliament, stated that when the SADF returned to South Africa “this country will save R (*i.e.*, rand) 1 million a day that it is spending.”<sup>1039</sup>

The ever-increasing expenditure on the military and security apparatus must be viewed in the context of the overall deterioration of the South African economy throughout the 1980s. For example, the annual GDP growth from 1980 to 1988 only

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<sup>1036</sup> G. Evans, “All along the Magnus line, 50km deep into Angola”, *The Weekly Mail*, 20-26 November 1987

<sup>1037</sup> Quoted in “Editorial”, *Die Kerkbode*, 8 June 1988

<sup>1038</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, 17 May 1988, 9950

<sup>1039</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, 6 June 1988, 13023-13024



averaged 1.4 per cent.<sup>1040</sup> Barend du Plessis, Minister of Finance, underscored the inadequacy of this growth rate, noting that the economy needed to expand at least 5 per cent per annum “to start catching up with certain backlogs.”<sup>1041</sup> Underlying the sluggish growth were a number of other serious economic issues. South Africa faced increasing problems with its balance of payments and falling level of investment.<sup>1042</sup> The balance of payments crisis was precipitated by a sharp fall in export earnings. From 1985 to 1980, the value of exports fell from \$26-billion US to \$16-billion US, a 38.5 per cent decline.<sup>1043</sup> From 1985 to 1988, capital, outflow amounted to an estimated 25-billion Rand (\$10-billion US).<sup>1044</sup> Also, during 1980 to 1988, inflation averaged 14.6 per cent, and the value of the Rand continued to decline on international currency markets, losing 77 per cent of its purchasing power.<sup>1045</sup>

As pressure mounted from the international antiapartheid movement, international sanctions began exact a serious toll. At the 18 May 1988 parliamentary session, Malan excoriated those countries who had by imposing sanctions compromised South Africa’s security: “Technology is being withheld from the Republic of South Africa...Loans are being withheld...The agricultural produce of the Republic of South

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<sup>1040</sup> *SAIRR 1988/89*, 323. See also, C. H. Feinstein, *An Economic History of South Africa* (Cambridge, 2005), 240; J. Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent* (Cambridge, 2007), 285

<sup>1041</sup> *SAIRR 1988/89*, 323

<sup>1042</sup> Feinstein, *An Economic History*, 224 & 245

<sup>1043</sup> *Ibid.*, 227

<sup>1044</sup> *SAIRR 1988/89*, 324. See also Feinstein, *An Economic History*, 226-227

<sup>1045</sup> *South Africa, 1989-1990: The Official Yearbook of the Republic of South Africa* (Pretoria, 1990), 784; *SAIRR 1988/89*, 323



Africa is being boycotted.”<sup>1046</sup> Several banks, most notably U.S. Chase Manhattan, refused to extend further loans and grant extensions on already existing ones, forcing Pretoria to suspend debt repayments in 1985-86. Major corporations began withdrawing from South Africa, with 127 U.S. companies leaving by 1987.<sup>1047</sup> This overall economic deterioration was reflected in a declining quality of life for most South Africans. Charles Feinstein noted that during the economic crisis “real incomes continued to fall and unemployment rose remorselessly.”<sup>1048</sup>

As the economy stagnated and international economic sanctions strengthened, it was much more difficult to finance the war in Angola. Cuito Cuanavale and its military aftermath illustrated the economic problems facing South Africa. With a stagnant economy straining under international sanctions, Pretoria did not have the funds required to replace and refurbish its equipment or continue waging the war. Hirsch Goodman, a correspondent in Johannesburg with informants in the Botha regime, argued that South Africa could “no longer afford the arms it needs to counter Luanda’s Cuban-piloted MiG-23s, Soviet T-54 and T-55 tanks, and an array of anti-aircraft missiles.”<sup>1049</sup> Goodman also noted that the estimated cost of occupying Namibian and prosecuting the war in Angola was US\$2-billion annually.<sup>1050</sup>

South Africa’s economic inability to wage war became a frequent subject of discussion at SSC meetings. As Cuban troops continued to mass in southern Angola,

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<sup>1046</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, 18 May 1988, 10093-10094

<sup>1047</sup> Feinstein, *An Economic History*, 230

<sup>1048</sup> *Ibid.*, 245

<sup>1049</sup> H. Goodman, “A Tug of Peace in War-Wearied Angola”, *U.S. News & World Report*, 15 August 1988, 30

<sup>1050</sup> *Ibid.*, 30



Botha argued at the 20 June meeting of the SSC that South Africa could not afford to maintain a prolonged or massive presence in Angola to challenge Cuban forces.<sup>1051</sup> The 25 July 1988 SSC meeting, with its focus now on Namibia, further illustrated the economic strain. To counter the Cuban military build-up in southern Angola, Pretoria had increased SADF mobilization and deployment in Namibia. However, Botha stated that the apartheid state could no longer finance the military presence. Botha emphasized that over the previous year it cost 1.35 billion Rand to occupy Namibia, with 730 million Rand allocated to maintain the SADF in Namibia.<sup>1052</sup> Botha deemed this outlay to be too expensive.<sup>1053</sup>

Major General Thirion confirmed that at the highest levels of the Botha regime the inability of the economy to support the war emerged as a serious quandary. Thirion stated that economics increasingly constrained the SADF, rendering South African intervention in Angola and the occupation of Namibia non-viable in the long-term: “The South African government would not have been able to make the books balance indefinitely in Angola and Namibia.”<sup>1054</sup> On another occasion he opined: “It was about the economy - how much more could it [the government] spend on the war and the military budget.”<sup>1055</sup> One anonymous Afrikaner intellectual commented that the apartheid ruling circles “forgot to consult the accountants.”<sup>1056</sup>

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<sup>1051</sup> SVR 12/88, 5, from MoD [Group 6]

<sup>1052</sup> SVR 13/88, 6, from MoD [Group 6]

<sup>1053</sup> Ibid., 6

<sup>1054</sup> Interview with Major-General Chris Thirion

<sup>1055</sup> Hamann, *Day of the Generals*, 128

<sup>1056</sup> Quoted at Jeremy Gordin, Foreword, 13-38 in de Kock, *A Long Night's Damage*, 30



The SADF military reversals in Angola generated unprecedented levels of anxiety among South African ruling circles. Coupled with the uncertainty over the SADF's ability to hold on to Namibia in the face of a possible Cuban invasion was apprehensiveness about the financial costs and South African deaths that would be incurred in countering such an invasion. South Africa could no longer sustain the human and material toll. Former SADF captain Andre Zaaiman stated that "the cost was too heavy" for the Botha regime to continue the conflict in Angola.<sup>1057</sup> The war in Angola, especially the 1988 reversals, highlighted the lack of an economic base upon which to effectively prosecute the war. The economy could no longer support the war effort. The war in Angola had revealed and exacerbated the economic problems and deficiencies facing the Botha regime.

#### **WHITE OPPOSITION TO THE WAR**

As in 1975-76, Pretoria attempted to control the information reaching the South African public about the 1987-88 military intervention in Angola. The *Official Secrets Act* of 1956, allowing the government to censor and control what was published and circulated in South Africa, provided the legal rubric under which new legal regimes of censorship were established. For SADF personnel, The *Official Secrets Act*, buttressed by the 1957 *Military Defence Code*, imposed severe restrictions on SADF personnel, prohibiting them from giving unauthorized interviews about their personal experiences or views in relation to SADF activities or where the SADF had operated. In short, this was an attempt to silence all servicemen except those who were assigned the specific task of representing the official government position.

Government-imposed censorship specifically sought to limit the reportage on South African military activities, especially operations outside of the country.

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<sup>1057</sup> Bravo, *After the Battle*



Censorship of the media reflected the effort to extensively manage knowledge of the war. As a result, John Deegan (who in 1981 served in the Koevoet, the paramilitary force) stated that most South Africans “didn’t know the kind of nonsense we were getting up to.”<sup>1058</sup> Clive Holt justified Pretoria’s stringent control of information on events in Angola, arguing that it prevented a wave of hysteria: “The South African public was demanding answers as to why their sons were fighting a war in a foreign country and the SADF could not tell them the full extent of the communist threat without risking massive public panic.”<sup>1059</sup>

The constraints on newspapers were emblematic. In August 1987, the Botha regime announced a new range of newspaper restrictions. These regulations were aimed at preventing or at least diminishing the publication of material that, *inter alia*, promoted “revolution or uprisings, breaking of public order, spreading or stirring up of hatred for security forces or the state and acts of civil disobedience.”<sup>1060</sup> The result was an uneven and spasmodic coverage of the 1987-1988 phase of the war in Angola. As a result, for example, *The Weekly Mail* and *The Star* intermittently published articles on Cuito Cuanavale.

During the apartheid era, *The Weekly Mail* (now the *Mail & Guardian*) and *The Star* were two of the most widely distributed and influential South African newspapers. While, the coverage of the war in Angola was not as regular as in the western newspapers, each had various periods where the coverage diminished or disappeared.

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<sup>1058</sup> The War Within, *Carte Blanche*, June 10. 2001.  
<http://beta.mnet.co.za/carteblanche/Article.aspx?Id=1750&ShowId=>

<sup>1059</sup> Holt, *At Thy Call*, 157

<sup>1060</sup> Untitled, *The Weekly Mail*, 3 – 9 September 1987



Nevertheless, despite the restriction, the articles that were published reveal that the two publications conveyed significant import to the military confrontation that unfolded in southern Angola in 1987-88. As already apparent in this dissertation, these articles, particularly in *The Weekly Mail*, were often quite detailed in outlining the impact on the apartheid regime and politics within South Africa.

In June 1988, at the height of the conflict in Angola, the censorship regime was strengthened, further restricting coverage.<sup>1061</sup> New emergency laws dictated that reports on security force actions could no longer be published without the permission of the Police Commissioner. As the censorship strictures increased, the number of articles and commentaries on the conflict in Angola decreased. The previous year a number of critical commentaries on South African involvement in Angola had been published.

*The Weekly Mail* was a particular target of the apartheid state.<sup>1062</sup> Pretoria targeted *The Weekly Mail* as it had a much wider circulation, occupying a prominent position as a voice within the white community against apartheid and the military interventions in neighbouring countries. Several of its issues were published with almost completely blacked-out front-pages to dramatize the extent of the restrictions. Also, in some cases, entire issues were confiscated by the state.<sup>1063</sup> This primarily accounts for

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<sup>1061</sup> See for example: S. Johnson, "All's quiet at the New Nation. Only the clatter of another telex from the SADF", *The Weekly Mail*, 31 March – 7 April 1988; "Blackout: New Emergency laws hit hard", *The Sowetan*, 13 June 1988

<sup>1062</sup> For a history of *The Weekly Mail*, see C. Merrett & C. Saunders, *The Weekly Mail, 1985 - 1990*, 458 - 486 in L. Switzer & M. Adhikari, *South Africa's Resistance Press: Alternative Voices in the Last Generation of Apartheid* (Ohio, 2000)

<sup>1063</sup> "Why your Weekly Mail disappeared from the shelves", *The Weekly Mail*, 12-18 August 1988 For a detailed discussion of censorship under apartheid, see: Gordon Jackson, *Breaking Story: The South African Press* (Colorado, 1993); S. Johnson, *The South African Progressive Press Under Emergency, 1986 - 1989*, 175 - 190 in K. Tomaselli & P. E. Louw (eds.), *The Alternative Press in South Africa* (London, 1991); R.



the limited coverage of Angola in 1988 as compared to 1987. Nevertheless, *The Weekly Mail* published in 1988, a number of articles on Cuito Cuanavale, discussing the impact on the apartheid regime. One article, for example, reported on “[a] serious setback suffered by South Africa’s soldiers in Angola...”<sup>1064</sup> Also, as illustrated in Chapter Four, *The Star* also published articles in 1988, reporting and sometimes editorializing on the situation in Angola. Coverage of the conflict in Angola in 1987-1988 in South African print media was not as extensive as in the U.S. or the U.K. This was, of course, a direct result of the draconian censorship regime. However, it can be argued that the South African coverage has more significance than that of the U.S or U.K. because it was in South Africa that any impact or consequences of Cuito Cuanavale would be directly manifested. In a society that either saw itself under siege or in a struggle for liberation, the stance of the print media provides a window on how the political imprimatur of events was evaluated and measured, a gauge of the ideas and opinions circulating among the South African public.

While *The Weekly Mail* and *The Star* were the only papers with sizable circulations among white South Africans that were surveyed, it seems evident that the war (especially, the military engagement at Cuito Cuanavale) was viewed as a significant event. The articles that appeared in all three publications indicate that the military situation was considered to be a serious factor in the ongoing peace negotiations that led to Namibian independence. Moreover, the military buildup in southern Angola was perceived or at least portrayed as a direct threat to South Africa itself (i.e., the apartheid

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Pollak, *Up Against Apartheid: The Role and Plight of the Press in South Africa* (Illinois, 1981); and G. B. Sperling & J. E. McKenzie, (eds.), *Getting the Real Story: Censorship and Propaganda in South Africa* (Calgary, 1990)

<sup>1064</sup> “Beyond The Turning Point: SA and its neighbours”, *The Weekly Mail*, 10-16 February 1988



regime). Many articles portrayed the Angolan developments as serious military reversal for the SADF. *The Weekly Mail* went further. As previously noted on several occasions, it assigned to Cuito Cuanavale an influence that went beyond the military into the political sphere and beyond Angola and Namibia into South Africa. The sense of the apartheid state's military vulnerability expressed in *The Weekly Mail* and *The Star* reflected the growing sense of misgiving among white South Africans about unfolding events in Angola as the conflict reached its climax. Various comments by members of South Africans parliament conveyed this unease. In November 1987, Progressive Federal Party parliamentarian Roger Hulley expressed his trepidation about ongoing SADF operations in Angola and the possible unfavourable outcome. He pondered if "there is not going to come a time where South Africa might find itself in deeper water than we can handle."<sup>1065</sup> This sentiment was, also, expressed from the ranks of the staunchest defenders of the apartheid *status quo*. Conservative Party member Jacobus H. Van de Merve echoed this disquietude, alluding to comparisons of the current military situation in Angola and South Africa's occupation of Namibia to the U.S. entanglement in Vietnam

What does, however, cause anxiety is the feeling one gets that South Africa's involvement in South West Africa is being portrayed to such an extent that it is being referred to as a Vietnamese situation. The war has indeed been in progress for many years and the important question which I think we all ask ourselves is: How much longer?<sup>1066</sup>

During his remarks in the 17 May 1988 parliamentary debate on the defence budget,

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<sup>1065</sup> P. Van Niekerk, "Strangely, this battle may lay a path to peace", *The Weekly Mail*, 20-26 November 1987

<sup>1066</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, 17 May 1988, 9950



Hulley also deployed the Vietnam analogy, going further than his comments of November 1987:

Chairman, in last year's debate on the Defence Vote I expressed my great concern about the deteriorating balance of military power in Angola, and said that we were slowly but surely being drawn into our own type of Vietnam. I have not revised that point of view. Our position has worsened significantly...The picture is deteriorating, I would say, to a frightening degree.<sup>1067</sup>

That these two similar comments came from members of parties that were often at ideological loggerheads (one liberal, the other fiercely conservative) indicated the growing level of unease among white South Africans. The most telling questioning and doubts about the war came from an unexpected quarter: the Dutch Reformed Church. This opposition was surprising as the Dutch Reformed Church had been an ideological and philosophical pillar of the apartheid state and its policies. In an 8 June 1988 statement in its newspaper, *Die Kerkbode*, the Church expressed in theological terms substantial misgivings about the war in Angola:

We would like to pose the question of whether it would not be morally and ethically correct for South Africa to withdraw its troops from Angola completely. After all it is not South African property. It appears that this more or less permanent presence of South African troops in this foreign country can be questioned on Christian ethical grounds. The prospect is that South Africa could be drawn into a battle on foreign soil with increasing loss of life.<sup>1068</sup>

*Die Kerkbode* also quoted the Afrikaner nationalist *Die Vaderland* editorial, which went beyond musings about doubts and efficacy to call unambiguously for an end to the war:

This is a war that neither side can win and hopes should be fixed on the efforts of peace. We might yet have to pay more dearly for such a peace, but it is not nearly so expensive as a war without end...it would

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<sup>1067</sup> *Ibid.*, 9971

<sup>1068</sup> "Editorial", *Die Kerkbode*, 8 June 1988. See Crawford, *The Domestic Consequences*, 28



be to nobody's comfort to have to stand at the graves of so many young men and women and confess that it was all in vain.<sup>1069</sup>

*Die Kerkbode's* and *Die Vaderland's* editorials constituted not only a new source of dissent to Pretoria's policies but a source from within a traditional bulwark of the Botha regime and the campaign to repel threats from outside South Africa's borders. In response to this criticism from a previously steadfast ally, Defence Minister Malan felt compelled to reply, declaring that *Die Kerkbode* had been misguided as it "overlooked military strategic interests" of South Africa.<sup>1070</sup> An editorial in *The Star* captured the significance of this emerging dissidence:

Doubts about the wisdom of the Government's military strategy are not new. But what is especially significant about *Die Kerkbode's* querying the ethics of the Angola operations is that the doubts are now being expressed from within the National Party's own constituency. Hardly a revolt, but this subterranean questioning from the guardians of the Afrikaner conscience cannot be easily ignored by government.<sup>1071</sup>

While the statement by *Die Kerkbode* constituted a departure for a major institution of Afrikaner nationalist circles, support for the war had been waning among white South Africans, as a whole. Two polls indicated this decline. A 1982 poll found that 81.1 per cent of white South Africans supported SADF operations against "terrorist/guerrilla bases in neighbouring countries."<sup>1072</sup> By 1988, this support had dropped to 63 per

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<sup>1069</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1070</sup> R. Jaster, *The 1988 Peace Accords and the Future of South-Western Africa* (London, 1990), 22

<sup>1071</sup> "Editorial", *The Star* (Johannesburg), 8 July 1988

<sup>1072</sup> Andre Du Pisani, *What Do We Think? A Survey of White Opinion on Foreign Policy Issues* (Johannesburg, 1990), 10



cent.<sup>1073</sup> This reflected an emerging general feeling of insecurity and vulnerability among the white South African population as the number of white casualties continued to rise. This sense of unease was palpable enough for *The Times* to invoke the Vietnam metaphor: “White deaths in Angola are already causing ripples of concern in South Africa, and there are fears that the country is becoming enmeshed in its own mini-Vietnam.”<sup>1074</sup> Peter Vale also employed the now ubiquitous Vietnam analogy, noting that “the spectre of white communities in each town or hamlet burying their war dead - in American terms, the “Vietnam syndrome” - will rest uneasily with whites.”<sup>1075</sup>

Quite often white South African misgivings were manifested in frustration over the lack of knowledge and uncertainty about the conflict in Angola and the activities of the SADF. Tanya Hannath, whose 19-year old brother (Anthony Steward) died in combat, expressed this frustration: “Nobody knows what is going on up there. We’d like to know what happened.”<sup>1076</sup> Ann-Marie Wallace, who spoke with other mothers whose sons were also serving in the SADF, said the reluctance and refusal of the SADF to provide information was a common experience. In the case of her own son, William, the SADF never told her where he was fighting, who he was fighting or how he was killed: “All we were told were that our children were on the border. I was only told he died over the border.”<sup>1077</sup>

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<sup>1073</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1074</sup> P. Godwin, “Secret talks on Angolan war: Military impasse leads to unlikely thaw between South Africa and the Soviet Union”, *The Times*, 13 March 1988

<sup>1075</sup> Vale, *The Weekly Mail*, “The 13 unlucky years between the two battles of Calueque”, 1-7 July 1988

<sup>1076</sup> T. Allen-Mills, “South Africa’s whites question Angolan forays”, *The Independent*, 14 November 1987

<sup>1077</sup> Interview with Ann-Marie Wallace



This frustration was matched by a growing disaffection of the younger generation: those who were being called up to do the actual fighting and dying. This decline was particularly dramatic. A 1982, poll indicated that 86.5 per cent of those aged 16-25 believed that a military victory in Angola was possible.<sup>1078</sup> In 1988, among those aged 16-24, only 50 per cent now believed South Africa would win.<sup>1079</sup> The *Resister*, the banned but clandestinely circulated journal of the Committee for South Africa War Resistance, captured this skepticism (perhaps pessimism) about South Africa's prospects of victory, outlining the disadvantageous shift in military fortunes against the SADF that had occurred in Angola. Its February/March 1988 issue published an article on the battle for Cuito Cuanavale, which focused on South Africa's invasion of Angola and its failure to take the strategic town. Characterizing the invasion as illegal, it argued that "[h]aving met with determined resistance and suffered extensive casualties in fighting between September and December last year, the SADF ground forces have been reluctant to take on FAPLA."<sup>1080</sup> It also noted that "several South African jets had been shot down over Angola recently and Cuito Cuanavale has good anti-aircraft defences."<sup>1081</sup>

Increasing numbers of young white men began refusing service in the armed forces, swelling the ranks of the organized white opposition to the war, especially the burgeoning End Conscription Campaign (ECC), formed in 1983. Fuelling the anti-conscription drive and the opposition to the war was the mounting death toll. As former soldier, Mark Patrick stated: "One of the things that was starting to happen was that

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<sup>1078</sup> Skote Klap in bly styl om diesplig, *Die Suid-Afrikaan*, October/November 1988, 17

<sup>1079</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1080</sup> *Resister: Journal of the Committee for South Africa War Resistance*, N<sup>o</sup> 54, (1988), 18-19

<sup>1081</sup> *Ibid.*, 19



white people were starting to die up there and with that there became a lot of pressure for South African troops to withdraw.”<sup>1082</sup> The editorial in February/March 1988 issue of the *Resister* elucidated this trepidation among white youth, stating “the SADF’s recent invasion has shown that the SADF can no longer guarantee conscripts and their families that it has military superiority in the region. The relatively high number of troops killed and maimed has made many conscripts realise that military service can lead to death or permanent injury.”<sup>1083</sup>

This led many youth to question the right of the South African government to conscript and order them to fight in Angola or Namibia. This questioning, according to Uys du Buisson, only increased as more recruits were conscripted. Buisson, who was from Durban, noted that among the youth there was a growing sense of alienation from the older generation. Summing up this estrangement he noted: “It was my generation that fought the war. I lost friends. Others lost eyes, limbs. P.W. Botha and his generation did not fight a war but they made the decision to send the next generation to war without consulting them.”<sup>1084</sup> A very serious discussion took place among du Buisson’s friends about the legitimacy of fighting in Angola. He stated that most rejected the regime’s rationale and justification for the war and did not want to serve in the SADF: “In Durban very few people in my community supported the war. No one wanted to go to the border.”<sup>1085</sup> Anti-war songs reflected this general opposition. A popular song written

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<sup>1082</sup> Bravo, *After the Battle*

<sup>1083</sup> Editorial, *Resister: Journal of the Committee for South Africa War Resistance*, N<sup>o</sup>.54, (1988), 2

<sup>1084</sup> Interview with Uys du Buisson, Pretoria, 5 August 2006

<sup>1085</sup> *Ibid.*



when B.J. Vorster was prime minister captured sentiments of skepticism, cynicism and fatalism:

Come on all you big strong men  
Uncle John needs your help again.  
Got himself in a bit of a jam  
Way down yonder in Ovamboland

So put down your books  
And pick up your gun.  
We're off to have a whole lot of fun.

And it's one two three  
What are we fighting for?  
Don't ask me I don't give a damn  
Next stop Ovamboland.  
There ain't no use to wonder why  
Whoopie...we're all bound to die.

Then it's five, six, seven  
Open the pearly gates  
It aint' no use to wonder why  
Whoopie we all going to die.<sup>1086</sup>

Growing disillusion with and opposition to the war in 1988 was captured in the *Boetman is die bliksem - Boetman is angry* - debate initiated by former SABC journalist Chris Louw, who wrote a May 5, 2000 letter (later turned into a play) to Willem de Klerk, brother of F.W. de Klerk and an influential figure in the National Party. *Boetman* refers to an Afrikaans diminutive used to address a younger person.<sup>1087</sup> Louw castigated the former Botha government, accusing the regime of "political cowardice and deceit by

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<sup>1086</sup> G. Baines, South Africa's Vietnam? Literary History and Cultural Memory of the Border War, *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Comparative Studies*, 'V', 2, [www.samagte.co.za/cassinga/vietnam.pdf](http://www.samagte.co.za/cassinga/vietnam.pdf); "The War Within," *Carte Blanche*, 10 June 2001. Available at: <http://beta.mnet.co.za/carteblanche/Article.aspx?Id=1750&ShowId=1>

<sup>1087</sup> A. Sparks, *Beyond the Miracle: Inside the new South Africa* (Johannesburg & Cape Town, 2003), 140-141; See also "Journalist Chris Louw dies", *Cape Times* 1 December 2009



sending the younger generation to war to defend apartheid.”<sup>1088</sup> Despite being written more than ten years after the conflict, Louw’s missive resonated with many SADF veterans and opponents of conscription, who saw it as encapsulating their thoughts in the 1980s. Du Buisson stated that the *Boetman is die bliksem* debate articulated many of the feelings and discussions of his family and friends had at the time of the war in Angola.<sup>1089</sup>

The number of those rejecting National Service also rose dramatically. For example, while in 1984 1,596 conscripts failed to report, in the first half of 1986, alone, 7,589 refused to serve, representing more than 10 per cent of all conscripts.<sup>1090</sup> In response, to the growing refusal to serve in the SADF, Pretoria started to make examples of those who defied SADF authority. In March 1988, Dr. Ivan Toms, a leading member of the ECC, was given a prison sentence of 21 months after refusing to report for duty when called up by the SADF.<sup>1091</sup> The regime also denounced the ECC. Daniel Petrus de Klerk Van de Gend, member of the ruling National Party, condemned the ECC as “one of the extra-parliamentary instruments which our enemies were using, not only to discredit the Defence Force and its loyal troops, but also as a way of undermining the existing order and system in this country.”<sup>1092</sup>

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<sup>1088</sup> “Journalist Chris Louw dead”, *Mail & Guardian* (Johannesburg), 11 December 2009

<sup>1089</sup> Interview with Uys du Buisson

<sup>1090</sup> J. Cock, *Colonels & Cadres: War & Gender in South Africa* (Oxford, 1991), 81

<sup>1091</sup> M. Levy, “Objector Toms gets 630 days”, *The Weekly Mail*, 4-10 March 1988, 1 & 3; J. D. Battersby, “More Whites in South Africa Resisting the Draft”, *New York Times*, 28 March 1988

<sup>1092</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, May 18, 1988, 10118



Denunciations and retaliatory acts did not stop the ECC. In early August 1988, 143 men publicly refused to participate in the war, declaring that they would “never serve in the South African Defence Force.”<sup>1093</sup> In response, the Botha regime imposed severe restrictions on the ECC, culminating in its banning on 24 August 1988.<sup>1094</sup> This action did not discourage expressions of support for the ECC. Jan Van Eck, Progressive Liberal Party, defended the ECC and the growing opposition to service in the SADF:

I want to tell the hon [sic] State President and his government that they have no right to sacrifice the lives of young men on the altar of reckless adventures in Southern Africa. It is no wonder that the resistance to compulsory military service is still increasing. However, the ban of the ECC will not end this resistance.<sup>1095</sup>

Mothers also became active participants in the struggle against conscription. Some women tried to opt their sons out of SADF service or at least ensure their sons served in an arm of the SADF that was not involved in the Angolan conflict. For example, Petri Le Roux was opposed to her son fighting in the war and managed to have him transferred to the navy: “My son was called up for service in 1987-1988. He was called up but I did not want him to go fight. I was able to get him transferred to the navy.”<sup>1096</sup> Increasingly white South African mothers began publicly speaking out against the emotional and psychological harm of conscription and the war on their families. For instance, the

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<sup>1093</sup> L. Switzer, Les & A. Mohamed Adhikari, *South Africa's Resistance Press: Alternative Voices in the Last Generation of Apartheid* (Athens, Ohio, 2000), 473

<sup>1094</sup> 1988 *Race Relations Survey*, 593; “The full list of the 143 names”, *The Weekly Mail*, 5-11 August 1988, 10; G. Davis and T. Gqubule, “A bitter row wages over peace”, *The Weekly Mail*, 5-11 August 1988, 10-11; C. Rickard, “Not I, says brother of soldier in Paton’s essay”, *The Weekly Mail*, 5-11 August 1988, 10; “The ECC Banning”, *The Weekly Mail*, 26 August – 1 September 1988, 9; and “This loyal Afrikaner won’t do an army camp: The difference: he’s HNP”, *The Weekly Mail*, 12-18 August 1988, 1

<sup>1095</sup> *South African Parliamentary Debates: Hansard*, August 24, 1988, 15558

<sup>1096</sup> Interview with Petri Le Roux, Cape Town, August 10, 2006



October/November 1988 issue of *Die Suid Afrikaan* carried the article “Sameswering van stilte” (Conspiracy of Silence) discussing the psychological effects of the war on conscripts and their families.<sup>1097</sup>

This dissent assumed its most organized and public expression on 7 February 1989 at a series of press conferences in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban involving an estimated 900 mothers who protested the SADF call-up of reservists for military service. The call-up prompted the coalescence of mothers across South Africa into collective action as they “pledged to support their sons who felt they were unable to serve in the SADF for various reasons.”<sup>1098</sup> In their official statement, the mothers declared their opposition to the SADF policy:

We are deeply aware of the traumatic effect conscription has on our sons, many of whom serve against their will while questioning what the SADF is doing in the townships and beyond our borders. We also suffer with our sons who choose not to serve. The choices for them are painful: To leave the country; to be sent to prison for six years; to live in the uncertain world of evasion, or as religious pacifists to face a punitive six years of government service.<sup>1099</sup>

The growing public disenchantment with South Africa’s role in the conflict in Angola and Namibia was indicated by other *Cape Times* items. In the same issue and on the same page covering the mothers’ press conferences, William Streenkamp, a reservist in the Citizen Force, penned an opinion piece, asking “was it really necessary to fight the war.”<sup>1100</sup> Rolfe Eberhard’s letter of 10 February 1989 to the editor, expressed on behalf

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<sup>1097</sup> C. de Villiers, Sameswering van stilte [conspiracy of silence], *Die Suid Afrikaan*, October-November, 1988, 13 & 25

<sup>1098</sup> “Moms speak out against call-up”, *Cape Times*, 8 February 1989

<sup>1099</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1100</sup> “SWA: Who won the War”, *Cape Times*, 8 February 1989



of the Conscientious Objectors Support Group solidarity for the mothers' protest.<sup>1101</sup> However, the expression of discontent was not confined to newspapers, public protest or acts of civil disobedience. One of the most poignant illustrations of growing disaffection with and opposition to the war was *The Stick*, a film made in 1987, but not released until 1989 due to the SADF's efforts to censor it by demanding 48 cuts to the final version. It opened the Montreal World Film Festival, had a special screening at the 1989 Moscow International Film Festival and was nominated for Best Picture at the AA Life/M-Net Vita Awards.<sup>1102</sup>

*The Stick* explores the psychological deterioration of SADF soldiers as they succumb to *bossie-koors* or "bush fever," eventually ending-up in the condition of being *bosbefok* or "bush fucked." Made in the tradition of other antiwar films (such as *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket*), *The Stick* uses the SADF incursions and operations in Angola and Namibia as its subject matter, following a small infantry group (a "stick" in SADF jargon) as they carry out a mission in the "war on the border." The film begins with a narrator voice over. The narrator, a member of the "stick", conveys a sense of ambivalence, disgruntlement and opposition to SADF operations outside of South Africa's borders: "It wasn't enough to give speeches about patriotism, hand out medals and talk about the invasion of communism. We were too busy trying to stay alive to worry about our mothers and sisters being raped by homesick Cubans. Unhappy but going over the border again. We shouldn't be here."

The opening narration is followed by a dramatic scene in which returning body bags are unloaded of an entire SADF platoon, who had been killed by guerillas. The accompanying voice over, declares: "It was demoralizing." To avenge and extract

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<sup>1101</sup> "There must be a suitable alternative to conscription", *Cape Times*, 10 February 1989

<sup>1102</sup> *The Stick*, directed by Darrell Roodt and produced by Anant Singh (Durban, 1987)



retribution for the platoon's destruction, a "stick" is sent out on a search and destroy mission. The orders are simple: find and kill the guerillas, taking no prisoners. Coming upon a small village, they massacre everyone. After the massacre, the soldiers experience a series of apparent hallucinatory visions, in which the leader of the village, in spirit form, slakes his vengeance. Eventually, after a journey, filled with more violence and bloodshed, only one member of "the stick" survives and returns to South Africa. At the end, the sole survivor, now revealed to be the film's narrator, is discharged from hospital. As the film closes, he makes the unambiguous statement underscoring not only the futility of South Africa's intervention but also biting cynicism toward the Botha regime: "The war was a lost cause. But they knew that already."

While, the Botha regime through censorship could limit knowledge of SADF activities outside of South Africa and the extent of casualties, it could not completely hide the mounting death toll. The regime could not prevent families who had lost sons and brothers speaking with other families who had suffered similar losses, nor the intermittent publication of news articles. This contributed to a growing sense of dissension among whites. The regime was not inured to this dissension, with its inner circle cognizant that the war was increasingly unpopular. This was illustrated by the 25 July 1988 SSC's discussion of the 1988 military call-up, with Geldenhuys remarking that "there were concerns about the reaction of parents to the call-up."<sup>1103</sup>

Botha factored this growing unpopularity, particularly the growing alarm over casualties, into his political considerations. This was reflected in the reluctance to risk a military escalation in Angola that would have entailed much higher losses. At the 25 July 1988 SSC meeting, he stated that he was "not willing to have a high number of South

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<sup>1103</sup> SVR 13/88, 5, from MoD [Group 6]



African soldiers killed in Angola”, predicting a death toll of 1, 000 to 1,500.<sup>1104</sup> While, this may have reflected a genuine concern for the well-being of SADF troops, it also seems plausible that what was paramount was the political concern about the possible reaction by white South Africans to such a high death toll.

Given the relatively small size of the white population, the growing SADF casualties reverberated throughout the society. Ronnie Kasrils has argued that “in small societies based on minority rule, a hundred deaths, even a dozen is a big blow.”<sup>1105</sup> As news of SADF setbacks and the death toll filtered out spasmodically in the various newspapers and by word of mouth, misgivings about the *war over the border* developed into opposition. This impact from below on white South Africans was registered in how ordinary people began to voice and then organize their concerns, whether in cultural forms (*e.g.*, song and film) or eventually finding its most public expression in a more expansive anti-conscription campaign that culminated in the mothers protest actions.

## **REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS & BLACK SOUTH AFRICANS**

During 1986-1987, the anti-apartheid movement inside South Africa appeared to have reached an impasse. On 20 July 1985, Botha declared a limited State of Emergency, encompassing 36 magisterial districts, which included the Eastern Cape and Pretoria, and later expanded to the Western Cape. On 12 June 1986, the State of Emergency was extended to the entire country. It was renewed and extended for two more years on 11 June 1987. The South African government arrested or detained more than 40,000 persons and instituted a policy in which “violence was now lethal and systematic in its

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<sup>1104</sup> SVR 13/88, 6, from MoD [Group 6]

<sup>1105</sup> Interview with Kasrils



assault on the black majority.”<sup>1106</sup> In the first half of 1987 alone, an estimated 30,000 persons were detained.<sup>1107</sup> The United Democratic Front (UDF) and Congress of South African Unions (COSATU) were “the most heavily affected by Emergency detentions.”<sup>1108</sup> In July 1987, there were mass arrests of UDF activists and almost all of COSATU’s leadership “went into hiding.”<sup>1109</sup>

This wave of repression stymied the internal anti-apartheid struggle. State repression had “restored a degree of government control and eliminated the possibility that Pretoria might be forced to negotiate a wholesale transfer of power.”<sup>1110</sup> Patrick Lawrence, a reporter for *The Weekly Mail*, concluded that the imposition of the State of Emergency “clearly fulfilled its immediate objective of containing the intensifying rebellion in the black townships,” and “proved that the army and the police can effectively counter revolutionary violence, as they did in 1976-77 and as they have done on the Namibian border.”<sup>1111</sup> The township of Crossroads provided a poignant example. A squatter community in the Cape Peninsula, it had been a major reservoir of opposition to apartheid. However, in the wake of the State of Emergency, the character of

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<sup>1106</sup> Basil Davidson, *Africa In History: Themes and Outlines* (New York, 1991), 347; See also J. Bekker, “Detention figure keeps rising”, *The Weekly Mail*, 11-17 July 1986, 4; and *1988 Race Relations Survey*, 583-604

<sup>1107</sup> *1988 Race Relations Survey*, xxxi

<sup>1108</sup> J. Bekker, “Detention figure keeps rising”, *The Weekly Mail*, 11-17 July 1986, 4

<sup>1109</sup> M. Badela, “Activists hide as UDF men held: Bags packed as unionists head back underground”, *The Weekly Mail*, 24-30 July 1987, 1

<sup>1110</sup> Stephen and Tsepo, *Comrades Against Apartheid: The ANC & the South African Communist Party in Exile* (Bloomington, 1992), 175

<sup>1111</sup> P. Lawrence, “Year of the Big Stick”, *The Weekly Mail*, 12-18 June 1987, 15



Crossroads was dramatically transformed. As Josette Cole noted, the government deliberately altered the community's demography:

By the end of 1986, the political terrain had been radically restructured by a state determined to maintain control over the majority of its black population...As a result of a political tragedy thousands of its former residents were dispersed throughout the black townships in small squatter settlements...Old Crossroads formerly a crucible of resistance, became the apple in the eye of the South African state and a monument to its co-optive strategies.<sup>1112</sup>

By all appearances the anti-apartheid struggle throughout southern Africa had “declined, contrary to the rather optimistic expectations of many observers.”<sup>1113</sup> Anti-Apartheid forces had “been ground down.”<sup>1114</sup> Colonel Patrick Ricketts, an ANC activist, stated that the “official organizational leadership of the anti-apartheid forces were paralysed” in the face of the nation-wide demonstration of the brute force and power of the apartheid state.<sup>1115</sup> The TRC noted that: “In the year after the imposition of the national state of emergency, the full force of a strategy of counter-revolutionary warfare unfolded domestically.”<sup>1116</sup> By the end of 1987, the TRC observed, the Botha regime had “succeeded in reasserting control and effectively defused whatever potential existed for an insurrectionary situation.”<sup>1117</sup> The workers movement reflected this dramatic demonstration of state power. While, strikes had reached record levels in 1987,

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<sup>1112</sup> J. Cole, *Crossroads: The Politics of Reform and Repression 1976-1986* (Johannesburg, 1987), 162-163

<sup>1113</sup> A.K. Mhina, Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa After Zimbabwe, 19-31 in I. S. R. Msabaha and T. M. Shaw (edd.), *Confrontation and Liberation in Southern Africa: Regional Directions After the Nkomati Accord* (Boulder, Colorado, 1986), 19

<sup>1114</sup> P. Nugent, *Africa Since Independence: A Comparative History* (Basingstok, 2004), 317

<sup>1115</sup> Interview with Colonel Patrick Ricketts

<sup>1116</sup> *Repression and Resistance*, 9

<sup>1117</sup> *Ibid.*, 39



with 1,148 actions, in 1988 the number declined substantially.<sup>1118</sup> While Pretoria could not permanently suppress, the internal anti-apartheid movement, it had temporarily subdued it.

Despite the scale of state repression and censorship the Black community was not oblivious to the ongoing developments in Angola. A survey of the most influential Black newspaper, *The Sowetan*, indicates there was considerable interest. Established in 1981, *The Sowetan* circulated primarily in Soweto.<sup>1119</sup> Despite the facing same restrictions imposed on other South African newspapers, *The Sowetan* intermittently published several articles on Cuito Cuanavale and the military situation in Angola. In 1987, *The Sowetan* ran a series of articles in 1987 on the battle's potential impact, with a front-page report on SADF deaths.<sup>1120</sup> South African casualties and government censorship were central themes, with accusations of government manipulation of casualty figures.<sup>1121</sup>

*The Sowetan* argued that the Angolan conflict had reached a critical phase, declaring that the South African armed forces had had lost air supremacy and sustained casualties "on a scale that has shocked the white South African community."<sup>1122</sup> To address the situation, *The Sowetan* called for an international conference to address the

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<sup>1118</sup> SAIRR (South African Institute of Race Relations), *Race Relations Survey 1987/88* (Johannesburg, 1987), xxxii

<sup>1119</sup> A. C. Quick (ed.), *World Press Encyclopedia: A Survey of Press Systems Worldwide*, 'II' (New York, 2003), 859. For a history of *The Sowetan* see K. G. Tomaselli, Ambiguities in Alternative Discourse: *New Nation* and *The Sowetan* in the 1980s, 378-403 in L. Switzer & M. Adhikari (eds.), *South Africa's Resistance Press: Alternative Voices in the Last Generation of Apartheid* (Athens, 2000)

<sup>1120</sup> "Four SADF Soldiers Dead", *The Sowetan*, 13 November 1987; See also "SADF Bungles Attempts to Stifle News", *The Sowetan*, 20 November 1987; and "SADF invasion slammed". *The Sowetan*, 20 November 1987

<sup>1121</sup> A. Klaaste, "War - the first casualty is truth", *The Sowetan*, 16 November 1987

<sup>1122</sup> Angola: "7 points for peace", *The Sowetan*, 23 November 1987



following issues: 1. Independence for Namibia within the framework of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 435; 2. Withdrawal of the South African army from the territory of Angola; 3. The rapid phasing-out of the Cuban combat forces from Angola once agreement had been reached over Namibia's independence, and the complete withdrawal of South African troops from Angola; and, 4. Ending South Africa's military support for Renamo and UNITA.<sup>1123</sup> This general prescription was similar to the overall accord between Angola, Cuba and South Africa that was signed in New York on December 22, 1988.

On 28 January *The Sowetan* reported that a major battle was being waged for Cuito Cuanavale.<sup>1124</sup> However, due to the new government censorship regulations, this was the last article to appear for more than two months on the situation in Angola. Finally an article published on 2 May characterized the battle for Cuito Cuanavale as "the biggest-ever battle fought in southern Africa," declaring that the "South Africans afraid of a Swapo victory in Namibia if they withdraw have occupied part of southern Angola to block Swapo guerillas and support Unita."<sup>1125</sup> However, it noted, since October 1987 "South Africans have lost tanks, irreplaceable aircraft and most importantly, 50 white troops."<sup>1126</sup> The article further noted that Pretoria wanted to avoid becoming bogged down in a full-fledged conventional war in southern Africa. This was followed by a discussion of the London round of negotiations between Angola, Cuba and

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<sup>1123</sup> "Angola: The Way to Peace", *The Sowetan*, 24 November 1987

<sup>1124</sup> "Bloody Battle Rages in Angola", *The Sowetan*, 28 January 1988

<sup>1125</sup> "The Agony of Angola", *The Sowetan*, 2 May 1988

<sup>1126</sup> *Ibid.*



South Africa on Namibian independence.<sup>1127</sup>

After a month's hiatus, portions of Geldenhuys's declaration of the seriousness of the Angolan military situation were published.<sup>1128</sup> This was followed by a series of articles on the negotiations, with the Cairo round of talks a central focus.<sup>1129</sup> In the same issue an article on the damage that the conflict had wrought on Angola was published.<sup>1130</sup> As the Cairo round progressed, it was given front-page coverage and presented as a framework for peace. Nevertheless, South Africa's wariness of the military situation was noted, noting Malan's statement that the SADF was ready for any development in Angola.<sup>1131</sup> The Calueque clash elicited a bold frontpage banner headline, covering conflicting South African and Angolan casualty accounts. The same issue underscored the sharpening military confrontation, with Malan threatening that the SADF was ready to be thrown at Cuban forces if hostilities expanded.<sup>1132</sup> The next issue (the last discussing in detail the military situation) quoted extensively from a Jorge Risquet interview.<sup>1133</sup>

While *The Sowetan* attempted to maintain a measured tone in its coverage, it does indicate that, at the very least, the editors deemed their audience interested in events in Angola. However, black and other non-white South Africans were more than just reading

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<sup>1127</sup> "Talks on Angola", *The Sowetan*, 4 May 1988

<sup>1128</sup> "Cubans, Swapo are reinforced", *The Sowetan*, 10 June 1988

<sup>1129</sup> See for example "No quick fix in Cairo", *The Sowetan*, 23 June 1988

<sup>1130</sup> "War ruins rich Angola", *The Sowetan*, 23 June 1988

<sup>1131</sup> "From Cairo With Hope", *The Sowetan*, 27 June 1988

<sup>1132</sup> "Angola: War Drums", *The Sowetan*, 30 June 1988

<sup>1133</sup> "Cuba will hit back", *The Sowetan*, 22 July 1988



about events in Angola. They were actively discussing and publicizing what had occurred. Alleison Lazarus, an ANC and UDF activist in Natal province stated that those in the anti-apartheid movement “were excited about Cuito Cuanavale. It was seen as a turning point, a definite blow against the regime.”<sup>1134</sup> For example, copies of the Cuban documentary *Respuesta a la escalada de SudAfrica* (*Response to the South African Escalation*), with English-language dubbing, were smuggled into the country. In her province, Lazarus said “[a] video copy of a Cuban film about the battle of Cuito Cuanavale was clandestinely circulated in Natal by unions and anti-apartheid organizations.”<sup>1135</sup> *The Weekly Mail* alluded to this circulation when it devoted two pages to an extensive discussion of the documentary, covering Castro’s speech to the May 1988 meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement, where he argued that Cuito Cuanavale was decisive for altering the balance of forces in southern Africa because “a powerful South African force, the superior race, were smashed on a small piece of territory defended by blacks and mulatos from the Angola and the Caribbean.”<sup>1136</sup>

Lazarus participated in secret viewings, after which discussions about the significance of the battle for South Africa would occur. She emphasized the emotional and morale response the film evoked: “For us watching the video, it was clear to us it was a victory. A victory for ourselves. A generator of change. We came away knowing what international solidarity was. Its impact was on a psychological level.”<sup>1137</sup> Willie Madisha, president of the Congress of South African Trade Unions from 1998 to 2009

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<sup>1134</sup> Interview with Alleison Lazarus

<sup>1135</sup> Interview with Alleison Lazarus

<sup>1136</sup> “Angola”, *The Weekly Mail*, 26 August - 1 September 1988

<sup>1137</sup> Interview with Alleison Lazarus



and a UDF activist during the 1980s, also, ascribed a very important psychological role to Cuito Cuanavale. In the wake of the 1986-87 repression, Madisha argued, the South African military setbacks refurbished the confidence of the anti-apartheid forces:

Black South Africans were aware of the defeat of the South African armed forces...In the streets people quoted Fidel's words about the history of Africa having to be spoken of as before and after Cuito Cuanavale. It said to the people that the South African armed forces and instruments of repression were not unbeatable. The people's militancy grew after Cuito Cuanavale as they were given greater confidence because the SADF had been beaten.<sup>1138</sup>

As discussed in Chapter One, participants in the 1976 upsurge pointed to the SADF defeat in Angola as an important factor in propelling the movement forward. Madisha asserted the same for the SADF defeat in 1988, stating that it "led to the intensification of the popular struggle inside South Africa."<sup>1139</sup> The psychological dimension was a critical component in fortifying the confidence of the antiapartheid forces. Nevertheless, while testimonies provide a window on the psychologic dimension, it is difficult to gauge the actual concrete impact on the antiapartheid struggle.

The psychological dimension was reflected in labour movement publications. For example, The *Cosatu News* and *NUM News* led their international sections with articles that ascribed a key role to Cuito Cuanavale in laying the foundations for the New York Accords. The the Congress of South African Trade Unions' *Cosatu News* affirmed the role of "the defeat of South African forces at Cuito Cuanavale, in forcing the Botha government to agree to independance [*sic*] for Namibia..."<sup>1140</sup> The *NUM News*, published by, the largest single union in South Africa, also, stated that South Africa's

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<sup>1138</sup> Interview with Willy Madisha, London, 10 March 2006

<sup>1139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1140</sup> Namibian workers speak, *Cosatu News*, March 1989, 18



withdrawal from Angola and Namibia was the result of the battle of Cuito Cuanavale.<sup>1141</sup> Strike activity also increased. In the first six months of 1989, “strikes were 200 per cent higher than in the same period in 1988.”<sup>1142</sup> Whether this increased strike activity was substantively connected to the events in Angola, a similar pattern, as discussed in Chapter One, had occurred in 1972-76. Perhaps, this psychological impact, or, at least, its value as an emotive boost was best captured by the recounting of a sermon delivered by Frank Chikane, the Secretary General of the South African Council of Churches, had condemned the South African invasion of Angola as a “blatant act aimed at ensuring the protection of apartheid.”<sup>1143</sup> Chikane outlined the history of European colonialism and neocolonialism in Africa, in general, and the history of racist rule in South Africa, in particular, resoundingly exclaiming: “And then there was Cuito Cuanavale!”<sup>1144</sup> His Cuito Cuanavale exclamation was met with raucous applause.<sup>1145</sup>

The ANC and SACP mirrored this dramatic response with an effusive, if not, ecstatic, series of articles according the Cuito Cuanavale a special place. Ronnie Kasrils stated that what had occurred in Angola had an “electrifying impact on the ANC and SACP.”<sup>1146</sup> Cuito Cuanavale was presented as a decisive encounter and an unprecedented defeat of the apartheid regime. The various organs (*Sechaba*, *Umsebenzi*,

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<sup>1141</sup> Cubans celebrate 30 years, *NUM News*, March 1989, 16

<sup>1142</sup> SAIRR (South African Institute of Race Relations), *Race Relations Survey 1988/89* (Johannesburg, 1989), XL

<sup>1143</sup> “SADF invasion slammed”, *The Sowetan*, 20 November 1987

<sup>1144</sup> Interview with Kevin Danaher and Medea Benjamin, San Francisco, 24 April 2005

<sup>1145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1146</sup> Interview with Ronnie Kasrils. See also Interview with Charles Setsubi Pretoria, 24 July 2006



*Mayibuye*, and *The African Communist*) devoted considerable space and commentary to Cuito Cuanavale and its repercussions for Pretoria. Other anti-apartheid organizations also described Cuito Cuanavale as a crucial event in the anti-apartheid struggle.

The ANC's *Sechaba* and the SACP's *Umsebenzi* gave the most comprehensive and consistent coverage. As the two most respected, influential and broadly based anti-apartheid organizations, the positions articulated in both organs would have reflected the contemporary understanding and perceptions of Cuito Cuanavale within the leadership of major anti-apartheid organizations. The articles coupled a matter-of-fact reporting to almost unrestrained euphoria for what was acknowledged as a serious setback for the SADF. Descriptions such as, "turning point", "watershed" and "humiliation" were unambiguously and frequently deployed.

In December 1987, *Sechaba* published an article on Namibia's struggle for independence. Focusing on the unfolding military situation, it stated that the SADF had "lost air superiority over Angola and on the ground the Angolan forces FAPLA can inflict heavy casualties on the racists."<sup>1147</sup> It further added "that the crisis facing the apartheid regime is as acute in Namibia as it is anywhere in the region."<sup>1148</sup> The February 1988 issue led with a seven-page article, "Pretoria's War In Angola." After arguing that South Africa intervened to prevent UNITA's destruction, it noted that Pretoria had "announced a growing number of SADF deaths in Angola, revealing that the battle is by no means over..."<sup>1149</sup> The article attacked the government's attempt to cover-up its intervention, noting that among whites inside the "growing anxiety and

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<sup>1147</sup> Namibian People Fight Under The Banner Of SWAPO, *Sechaba*, December 1987, 10

<sup>1148</sup> *Ibid.*, 11

<sup>1149</sup> Pretoria's War In Angola, *Sechaba*, February 1988, 3



anger...over high SADF casualties sustained in battles with FAPLA,” with Pretoria’s obfuscations aimed at concealing “the shift in the balance of forces in the region.”<sup>1150</sup> A report from the British newspaper *The Sunday Telegraph* discussing the deployment of MiG-23s was quoted as evidence of South Africa’s loss of air supremacy.<sup>1151</sup>

*Mayibuye*, at the time an underground ANC publication, reproduced battlefield photographs, including one of a captured South African troop carrier. The last page mentioned Cuito Cuanavale for the first time in any of the publications surveyed, praising Angola for “setting an example of heroic resistance and challenging the military might of the apartheid regime.”<sup>1152</sup> As the negotiations on the Angolan war and Namibian independence progressed, Cuito Cuanavale was seen as a decisive event for the entire region. The National Executive Committee of the ANC declared that the “agreement reached thus far is a victory for the peoples of Angola and the region of Southern Africa.”<sup>1153</sup> The September 1988 *Sechaba* devoted its editorial to Cuito Cuanavale, declaring:

What the Cubans and Angolans did at Cuito Cuanavale was of historic significance for the future of our struggle. When the history of our anti-colonial struggle is written Cuito Cuanavale will be regarded as a milestone.<sup>1154</sup>

*Phambili*, a discussion journal published in Johannesburg carried an extensive article on

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<sup>1150</sup> *Ibid.* 4

<sup>1151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1152</sup> *Ibid.* 8

<sup>1153</sup> The ANC Concur With The Frontline States, *Mayibuye*, N°8,(1988), 7

<sup>1154</sup> Editorial: The Solution Of The Regional Conflict In Southern Africa, *Sechaba*, September, 1988, 1



the negotiations for Namibian independence.<sup>1155</sup> It also printed extracts from three of Fidel Castro's speeches on Angola.<sup>1156</sup> The article on the negotiations concluded that Pretoria's "dramatic reversal" on Namibia was "the result of a special combination of factors which have fundamentally shifted the balance of forces in the region..."<sup>1157</sup> First among these factors was the "defeat of SA forces at Cuito Cuanavale," which "was a dramatic demonstration of the shift in the military balance of forces..."<sup>1158</sup> This defeat together with the loss of air-supremacy and the approach of Angolan/Cuban forces to the Namibian border, further underlined South Africa's military vulnerability. The military débâcle exacerbated South Africa's economic problems.<sup>1159</sup> Consequently, Pretoria could "no longer act as it pleases. Reality dictates otherwise...South Africa can no longer unilaterally impose its will on the region by force or by any other means."<sup>1160</sup> The article concluded by elucidating the impact on South Africa's internal situation. *Phambili* argued:

progress for the peoples of Angola and Namibia strengthens the struggles of South Africa's majority for liberation, and weakens the forces of apartheid and imperialism...If a global political settlement is reached involving independence for Namibia under 435 and an end to foreign aggression against Angola, it will have major implications for the situation in South Africa...it will demonstrate that the regime is not invincible.... such a settlement

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<sup>1155</sup> Angola and Namibia: Counter-Revolution in Retreat, *Phambili*, N°2, October 1988, 26-44

<sup>1156</sup> Fidel Castro On Why Cuban Volunteers Are In Angola, *ibid.*, 45-48

<sup>1157</sup> Angola and Namibia: Counter-Revolution in Retreat, *ibid.*, 26

<sup>1158</sup> *Ibid.*, 27

<sup>1159</sup> Angola and Namibia: Counter-Revolution in Retreat, *Phambili*, N°2, October 1988, 31-32

<sup>1160</sup> *Ibid.* 42-43



will focus enormous pressure on the regime to negotiate with its own people.<sup>1161</sup>

The November 1988 issue of *Sechaba* focused on Cuito Cuanavale and its consequences. Its front-cover consisted of a photograph of President Castro, the back-cover of Angolan troops. Extensive excerpts of Castro's July 26, 1988 speech were reproduced, where he dealt in detail with the battle.<sup>1162</sup> *Sechaba* also printed two maps to illustrate military developments from November 15, 1987 to April 30, 1988.<sup>1163</sup> The texts of the July 1988 New York and August 1988 Geneva agreements on troop withdrawal from Angola and Namibia's independence were published in their entirety.<sup>1164</sup> One article ascribed momentous significance to the Angolan events:

The failure of the racist forces to capture Cuito Cuanavale became one of those watersheds by which history is demarcated...the Botha regime moved from confident assurance to uncertainty and defensiveness, especially when it lost its command of the skies.<sup>1165</sup>

*Umsebenzi* published "Cuito Cuanavale: Turing Point In Southern Africa," enthusiastically describing Cuito Cuanavale as a decisive and unprecedented *débâcle* for Pretoria. Under the article's title appeared a quote from President Castro: "From now on the history of Africa will have to be written before and after Cuito Cuanavale."<sup>1166</sup> *Umsebenzi* declared:

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<sup>1161</sup> *Ibid.*, 43

<sup>1162</sup> The Battle for Angola: Fidel Castro Speaks, *Sechaba*, November 1988, 2-5

<sup>1163</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

<sup>1164</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7

<sup>1165</sup> B. Magubane, US Policy In Southern Africa: The Reagan Era, *Sechaba*, December 1988, 25

<sup>1166</sup> Cuito Cuanavale: Turning Point In Southern Africa, *Umsebenzi*, 'IV' (1988), 3



Has the South African Defence Force met its Waterloo in Southern Angola? The SADF has certainly been humiliated. The myth of the SADF's invincibility has been exposed and glaring weaknesses made visible...Whatever the outcome of the Namibian talks, the very fact of Pretoria's defeat will inspire our people and the Namibian people to greater efforts.<sup>1167</sup>

*Inqaba Ya Basebenzi*, the journal of the Marxist Workers' Tendency of the ANC, a rival and competing faction to the SACP, also saw Cuito Cuanavale as a key development: "During the past year the military balance has shifted in the war in southern Angola...SA/UNITA forces failed to capture the strategic town of Cuito Cuanavale. Instead, they got a bloody nose..."<sup>1168</sup> The article then extrapolated the economic consequences for the regime.<sup>1169</sup> An article in *Mayibuye*' first issue of 1989 contended that developments in Angola and Namibia would resonate inside South Africa: "What is happening in Angola and Namibia is certainly going to have an impact on the morale and confidence of the South African people."<sup>1170</sup> Among the many listed predicaments confronting the regime (internal resistance, the economy, corruption, and legal actions) Cuito Cuanavale was mentioned first.

Because the New York Accords called for the removal of ANC bases in Angola, members of MK saw the agreement as "a bitter pill indeed."<sup>1171</sup> The dream of MK fighters living in ANC camps inside Angola was to take armed struggle into South Africa. Tsepo Sechaba (the pseudonym for a member of the ANC underground) noted

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<sup>1167</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

<sup>1168</sup> Namibia/Angola: Will 'peace' deal hold? *Inqaba Ya Basebenzi*, N<sup>o</sup>. 27 (1988), 12

<sup>1169</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1170</sup> Forward To An Independent Namibia, *Mayibuye*, N<sup>o</sup>. 1 (1989), 4

<sup>1171</sup> S. Ellis and Tsepo, *Comrades Against Apartheid: The ANC & the South African Communist Party in Exile* (Bloomington, 1992), 191



that for these fighters, the requirement that the ANC relinquish their bases “was a heavy blow. They were now further away from South Africa than they had been ten years.”<sup>1172</sup> However, the ANC leadership viewed the Accords as a major blow against the apartheid state and, therefore, an advance for the anti-apartheid forces. The January 1989 *Sechaba* editorial “History And Time Not On Their Side” characterized 1988 as a watershed year:

The year 1988 has come and gone. It started on a discordant note for the apartheid system. After they were disgraced by the Angola and Cuban forces at Cuito Cuanavale, they belatedly called for a ceasefire and then negotiations - they agreed to quit Angola and to grant Namibia its independence. It is true they tried - and are still trying - to salvage what they can still from their sinking ship. History and time are not on their side.<sup>1173</sup>

In the same *Sechaba* issue, the ANC Heroes’ Day statement, also, stressed Cuito’s Cuanavale’s overarching significance:

FAPLA, the heroic Cuban internationalists fighting forces and the People’s Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), have transformed Pretoria’s aggressive adventure of Angola into a quagmire of defeat at the battle of Cuito Cuanavale.<sup>1174</sup>

The SACP’s theoretical journal, *The African Communist*, highlighted the singularity of Cuito Cuanavale by titling its first issue of 1989: “Botha’s Army in Crisis.” In its extensive editorial, it noted that the 22 December 1988 New York Accord represented “a significant advance for the cause of peace, freedom and democracy in all of Southern Africa.”<sup>1175</sup> It further argue that “[a]t the very least, it is a sign of South African abandonment, following its defeat at Cuito Cuanavale and the intensification of internal

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<sup>1172</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1173</sup> Editorial: History And Time Not On Their Side, *Sechaba*, January 1989, 1

<sup>1174</sup> ANC Statement: Heroes’ Day 1988, *Sechaba*, January 1989, 4

<sup>1175</sup> Editorial Notes, *The African Communist*, N<sup>o</sup> 116, First Quarter, 19



and external resistance to the apartheid regime, of its programme of open military expansionism in the region.”<sup>1176</sup> Another article assessed the state of the South African armed forces, emphasizing the impact of its loss of the aura of invincibility:

For an army which regards itself, in typical white racist fashion, as superior to anything on the continent, and which has built around it a myth of invincibility, defeat in Angola was a damaging blow...The SADF tried to put a brave face on its retreat from Angola...But it would be hard to imagine a more decisive reversal.<sup>1177</sup>

*Mayibuye* noted that the New York Accord was “hailed as a significant move in the right direction by all progressive mankind.”<sup>1178</sup> It argued “South Africa’s hold onto Namibia is on its last lap. Its dreams to continually destabilise and finally conquer Angola have been buried forever.”<sup>1179</sup> Namibian independence was Cuito Cuanavale ws “a result of the military defeat suffered by the racist army in Cuito Cuanavale...”<sup>1180</sup>

The liberation movement’s literature demonstrates that leading-sectors viewed Cuito Cuanavale and the subsequent events in southern Angola as a decisive blow to the apartheid regime. The exuberance was a direct function of the political and historical meaning with which the anti-apartheid organizations imbued Cuito Cuanavale It reflected their overall view that regional hegemony was central to the capacity of apartheid to sustain itself. Cuito Cuanavale, thus, represented the objective defeat of this hegemonic project. Also reflected in these aerticles was the stance that the struggle outside South Africa was linked to the struggle inside South Africa. Consequently, Cuito

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<sup>1176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1177</sup> *Ibid.*, 21

<sup>1178</sup> Forward To An Independent Namibia, *Mayibuye*, N°1 (1989), 4

<sup>1179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1180</sup> *Ibid.*



Cuanavale and its aftermath were considered a direct inspiration and impetus for the internal anti-apartheid movement. Cuito Cuanavale represented more than a military or strategic turning point, but what appears to be an affirming collective psychological catharsis.

## CONCLUSION

A grim atmosphere seemed to prevail throughout southern Africa in 1986 and 1987, particularly in the frontline states, those who bore the brunt of Pretoria's war of destabilization. Susan Hurlich, active with both SWAPO and MPLA, noted "the perception among people was that they faced a very heavy task."<sup>1181</sup> For many anti-apartheid activists in southern Africa, Pretoria's "strategy of total mobilization for counter-revolution was successfully knocking out the Frontline states."<sup>1182</sup> There had been a series of severe setbacks, such as: unfettered aggression in Mozambique, unrelenting and seemingly unstoppable SADF attacks throughout the region and intensified repression inside South Africa, nearly crippling many of the anti-apartheid organizations.<sup>1183</sup> As noted in Chapter One, Pretoria waged in unfettered and extensive aggression in the region. However, this bleak scene was transformed by the SADF military defeat in 1987-1988, "ushering in a period of hope and optimism in Angola and other neighbouring countries."<sup>1184</sup> Charles Setsubi, ANC military attaché in its Lusaka office, stated as the events unfolded in Angola, he and his international colleagues

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<sup>1181</sup> Interview with Susan Hurlich

<sup>1182</sup> S.Ellis and Tsepo, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 175

<sup>1183</sup> See for example: Brittain (1998), 119; I. Christie, *Samora Machel: A Biography* (London, 1989), xiii-xix; Davidson, (1991), 347-348; J. S. Saul, *Recolonization and Resistance in Southern Africa in the 1990s* (Toronto, 1993), 10-12; and M. van Diepe, *The National Question In South Africa* (London, 1988), 127-132

<sup>1184</sup> Interview with Susan Hurlich



“waited with bated breath. The atmosphere was electric.”<sup>1185</sup> The reversals in Angola stymied Pretoria’s campaign to secure southern Africa as its exclusive sphere of influence. Pretoria could no longer wage war on two fronts: on its borders and within its borders. Conceived as the means by which to secure the apartheid state, its prosecution had resulted in an unprecedented level of insecurity, both within and without.

The project had unraveled in Angola, the lynchpin of the Pretoria’s regional stratagem. Its military was overstretched, and no longer had the capacity to effectively and successfully project its power regionally. Setsubi noted that after “its defeats in Angola the Boers did not enter one frontline state.”<sup>1186</sup> Gen. Thirion observed that the military reversals in Angola persuaded Pretoria that a SADF panacea did not exist: “Cuito Cuanavale was proof that there would not and could not be a military solution to the war. If there was one Cuito Cuanavale and another Cuito Cuanavale, Angola would become a South African Vietnam.”<sup>1187</sup> The New York Accords were the direct result of the military events in southern Angola, catalyzed by Havana’s actions.

Disillusionment with and active opposition to the war in Angola by whites continued to increase. This was paralleled by heightened sense of confidence and certainty by Black South Africans that the apartheid regime not only could be beaten but had actually, been defeated in Angola. Namibia’s independence was viewed as a full-blown defeat for Pretoria that would have “incalculable consequences ... both in the confidence it would ignite in the black community and in the setback for the morale of many

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<sup>1185</sup> Interview with Charles Setsubi

<sup>1186</sup> *Ibid.* See also O. Tambo, *Tambo’s Opening Address To The ANC 48<sup>th</sup> National Conference, Durban*, 2 July 1991. Available at: [www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/or/or91-3.html](http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/or/or91-3.html)

<sup>1187</sup> Interview with Major General Chris Thirion



whites.”<sup>1188</sup> Peter Vale argued that Angolan and Namibian developments could have a significant influence inside South Africa, declaring the “setback at Cuito Cuanavale set in train a process, which was unthinkable 12 months ago.”<sup>1189</sup> The process leading to Namibian independence represented “the first time” that Pretoria “has surrendered territory by negotiating...”<sup>1190</sup> Vale noted that as result, especially given the international situation, “a negotiated end to apartheid itself, may be closer than we dare think.”<sup>1191</sup> Perhaps, Jorge Risquet presented the most expansive evaluation:

Advances in South Africa have been closely linked with the victory of independence in Mozambique, the victory of independence in Angola, the defeat of the racist South African troops in Angola in 1976, the triumph of Zimbabwe. Each of these historic events has had a great impact on the people of South Africa...Soon all the countries bordering South Africa will be independent. It is apartheid that will be surrounded.<sup>1192</sup>

What had happened in Angola and Namibia could not be sealed off from South Africa. A threshold had been passed. Pretoria felt the repercussions in the state and public arenas. Chapter Six examines the impact of the events in Angola and Namibian independence on the internal dynamics of the Botha regime.

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<sup>1188</sup> Brittain (1988), 123

<sup>1189</sup> P. Vale, Independence for Namibia, *Democracy in Action*, March 1989, 6

<sup>1190</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>1191</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>1192</sup> Risquet, Defeating the South Africans, 24-25 & 19



## **CHAPTER SIX: AFTERMATH: IMPACT ON THE BOTHA REGIME**

Cuito Cuanavale and the military engagements in southern Angola, as illustrated in Chapter Five, had repercussions for Angola and Namibia. Cuito Cuanavale's direct and immediate bearing on these two countries seems clear. There is compelling evidence that the regime's stance on Namibian independence was changed by the military situation in Angola. However, as illustrated in Chapter Five, Cuito Cuanavale's implications extended beyond Angola and Namibia into South Africa itself, affecting certain sections of the polity. White South Africans were increasingly disillusioned by the war, while Black South Africans, especially those involved in the organized antiapartheid struggle, were galvanized by the SADF defeat.

As illustrated in Chapter One several scholars have concluded that the military events in Angola were a significant factor in accelerating the end of apartheid. The defeat on the battlefield represented a definitive defeat in the military sphere. But what was its relation and influence on the ebb and flow of politics? What were the ramifications for the internal dynamics of the Botha regime and the apartheid state? In 1987 the military's hold on the state, as personified and concretized in the SSC, seemed unassailable. Yet in 1990 Botha and the military were no longer at the center of power, the ANC and the SACP had been unbanned, and Nelson Mandela was released unconditionally. While the military events in Angola were immediately antecedent to the dissolution of apartheid, how substantive was the connection? Where does the war in Angola, particularly Cuito Cuanavale, fit in the apartheid narrative? These are probably the most difficult questions to answer given the paucity of documentary material, the recentness of apartheid's end and the enduring controversy over Cuito Cuanavale. This chapter will examine these questions, while drawing some general conclusions about the



war in Angola (especially Cuito Cuanavale) and its import for South Africa's historical trajectory.

### **INTRANSIGENCE OF THE BOTHA REGIME**

Throughout the 1980s, particularly before 1988, the Botha regime demonstrated resolute resistance to domestic and international calls for substantive change. At certain instances, the regime was prepared to use various political stratagems, as opposed to outright repression, to stifle opposition. The May 1983 constitutional reforms epitomized this approach. The reforms amounted to only cosmetic attenuation of the existing arrangements and did not alter the underlying power relations. The new constitution, John Iliffe pointed out, represented "a new strategy for entrenching white supremacy."<sup>1193</sup> The nationwide township rebellions that broke out in 1984, followed by the ANC's 1985 New Year's call to render South Africa ungovernable, signaled the rejection and the failure of the regime's strategy. In response, Pretoria refused to accede to the demands for change. Botha's defiant policy speech of 6 May 1985 (popularly referred to as the Rubicon Speech) and the imposition of the 1986 State of Emergency and the attendant widespread repression of 1986-1988 demonstrated the regime's opposition to any transition to Black majority rule. The report by the *Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group on Southern Africa*, which visited South Africa in June 1986, captured the situation, declaring that the South African government was "not prepared to negotiate fundamental change, nor to countenance the creation of genuine democratic structures, nor to face the prospect of the end of white domination and white power in the foreseeable future."<sup>1194</sup> The report further concluded that Pretoria "believes that it can

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<sup>1193</sup> J. Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent* (Cambridge, 2007), 286

<sup>1194</sup> *Mission to South: The Commonwealth Report: The Findings of the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group on Southern Africa* (New York, 1986), 133



contain the situation indefinitely by use of force.”<sup>1195</sup> In his foreword, Shridath Ramphal (then Commonwealth Secretary-General) concurred, stating that Pretoria was far from having the “acceptance” or “readiness” to bring the apartheid regime to an end.<sup>1196</sup>

This “unreadiness” was immediately demonstrated on the day the Eminent Persons Group left South Africa by a series of SADF raids on Gabarone, Harare, and Lusaka. Botha’s treatment of Geoffrey Howe, British Foreign Secretary, further illustrated this “unreadiness.” Howe visited South Africa in July 1986, in order, as he put it, “to nudge the wheel of history towards peace and reconciliation in South Africa.”<sup>1197</sup> Botha responded by rebuffing Howe, declaring: “We have seen clearly what happened in Angola, as well as in Vietnam, Nicaragua, Kampuchea, Afghanistan and Iran. We will consequently not allow our heritage of more than 300 years to be placed needlessly on the altar of chaos and decay.”<sup>1198</sup> He further demonstrated his disdain, when on the heels of Howe’s visit the SADF launched additional attacks against Zambia and Botswana.

The resounding victory of the National Party (NP) in the 6 May 1987 elections, winning 52.3 per cent of the vote and 133 of 178 seats, further emboldened Botha’s rejection of meaningful reform. With the Conservative Party emerging as the new official opposition with 26.6 per cent of the vote and 23 seats, the South African parliament was firmly in the hands of Afrikaner nationalists. Botha had received the mandate from the white South African electorate to resist efforts to dismantle the

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<sup>1195</sup> *Ibid.*, 135

<sup>1196</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-15

<sup>1197</sup> P. Laurence, “What PW told Geoffrey Howe: Hands off SA!”, *The Weekly Mail*, 25-31 July 1986

<sup>1198</sup> *Ibid.*



apartheid system. He remained intransigent, continuing to reject the possibility of negotiations with the ANC.

By the end of 1987 the Botha regime appeared so unyielding and the wave of repression unleashed by the 1986 State of Emergency (as argued in Chapter Five) so comprehensive, that the situation seemed bleak. The apartheid state had withstood the township rebellions and vigorously rebuffed international diplomatic measures. Several African leaders became resigned to accepting “the previously unthinkable possibility that ‘the inevitable end of apartheid’ was much further off than they publicly predicted.”<sup>1199</sup> Negotiations with the ANC seemed to be a remote prospect. For example, at the December 1987 ANC Arusha conference Julius Nyerere, Tanzanian president, stated “negotiations [with South Africa] are not possible yet.”<sup>1200</sup>

Mirroring this assessment, the dominant view among many southern African specialists and scholars at that time was that the end of apartheid was not going to occur in the immediate short-term. For example, a number of papers from a 1987 workshop on the future of the apartheid system argued that the apartheid system and demonstrated considerable resilience and staying power, which did not augur well for its demise in the foreseeable future. While outlining the structural conditions – economic, social and political – that made apartheid ultimately unviable, Brewer asserted that this did not mean “that in the short term South Africa will become more unstable...stalemates can persevere for a long time.”<sup>1201</sup> Rich held that the South African “state has the capacity to

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<sup>1199</sup> V. Brittain, Cuba and Southern Africa, *New Left Review* N<sup>o</sup>. 172, 1988), 119

<sup>1200</sup> “Three Views on the prospects for negotiations”, *The Weekly Mail*, 11-17 December 1987, 10

<sup>1201</sup> J.D Brewer, Internal Black Protest, in J.D. Brewer, ed. *Can South Africa Survive? Five Minutes to Midnight* (London, 1989) p, 34



survive for a long time.”<sup>1202</sup> Among leading U.S. think tanks, the established view was that the liberation movement was too weak to threaten the apartheid regime. For Butts and Thomas, the overweening power of South Africa was indisputable: “South Africa dominates the states of the region...South Africa is the regional power of Southern Africa.”<sup>1203</sup> Gann and Duignan from Stanford University’s Hoover Institute asserted that any discussion of apartheid’s defeat was “military fantasy” and “political fable,” at it was evident that “[w]hite control will last indefinitely.”<sup>1204</sup> In short, it seemed that apartheid’s end was a distant prospect.

### **REGIME FISSURES**

As discussed in Chapter One, facing national liberation struggles in Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe and rising internal resistance, a faction within the elite (devoted to a military solution both within and without South Africa) gained control of the government and was able to prevail at the state’s helm. Nevertheless, while Botha and the military high command, through the SSC, held firmly onto the reins of state power; various factions existed within the South Africa elite. The extent of the divisions varied over the lifetime of apartheid. With Botha’s assumption of power, the factional contestations initially revolved around the optimum strategy and tactics to secure and preserve the apartheid regime. Central was the debate on the means to defeat and neutralize the internal and regional anti-apartheid forces.

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<sup>1202</sup> P. B. Rich, Doctrines of ‘Change’ in South Africa, in J.D. Brewer, ed. *Can South Africa Survive*, 305

<sup>1203</sup> K. Hughes Butts and P. R. Thomas, *The Geopolitics of Southern Africa: South Africa as Regional Superpower* (Boulder and London, 1986), 6

<sup>1204</sup> Lelyveld, *Move Your Shadow*, 338



Initially, the most powerful sections of the capitalist class accepted that South African faced an unrelenting external onslaught, necessitating Pretoria's *total strategy* response. In 1979 at a conference convened by more than 200 South African corporate leaders, Botha laid out the regime's "proposals for a *total strategy* to protect private enterprise and civilized standards in South Africa against the Marxist threat..."<sup>1205</sup> Botha outlined a series of concessions that the government would extend to the corporate community. In response many business leaders opted to support "the apartheid government, arguing that it was a safer bet than the forces of chaos and communism allegedly ranged on the side of the black opposition."<sup>1206</sup> A consensus had been forged within the capitalist class.

Nevertheless, with rising black resistance and the economy declining under the weight of its structural problems and international sanctions, a faction emerged in the South African elite (especially, within the business sector) that shifted its position from one from based on the best ways and methods to preserve the status quo to one based on a debate on the efficacy of maintaining apartheid, even the imperative to dismantle the institutions of white supremacy. Consequently, in the 1980s there were several contacts and talks between South African business interests and other 'dissidents' with the ANC. In January 1985, David Willers, the London director of the South African Foundation met two ANC officials in London. The South African Foundation was an association of various South African corporations established to transform the image of South Africa, in general, and South Africa businesses in particular. Willers informed the ANC that

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<sup>1205</sup> G. Huston, Capital Accumulation, Influx Control and the State in South Africa 1970-1982, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 'VIII' (1988), 124-125

<sup>1206</sup> A. Handley, *Business and the State in Africa: Economic Policy-Making in the Neo-Liberal Era* (Cambridge, 2008), 50



South African businesses wanted substantive change in the country and supported the legalization of the ANC.<sup>1207</sup> In June 1986 in New York at a conference hosted by the Ford Foundation, Thabo Mbeki, then Director of the ANC's Department of Information and Publicity, met and held discussions with Pieter de Lange, president of Rand Afrikaans University and the Afrikaner Broederbond. In another June 1986 meeting, this time in London, ANC President Oliver Tambo held discussions with Chris Ball, chief executive officer of First National Bank in South Africa. In 1987, Ball called for the unbanning of the ANC.<sup>1208</sup>

The most conspicuous meeting was held from 9-12 July 1987 in Dakar, Senegal between 17 ANC representatives and a group of 61 prominent white South Africans (including university professors, farmers, and members of parliament). This meeting resulted in the Dakar Declaration, outlining the participants' unanimous rejection of apartheid and the necessity for negotiations between Pretoria and the ANC and expressing "a unity of purpose arising from a shared commitment towards the removal of the apartheid system and the building of a united, democratic and non-racial South Africa."<sup>1209</sup> The Declaration singled out the Botha regime as the major impediment to change, noting "that the attitude of those in power is the principal obstacle to progress in this regard."<sup>1210</sup> One of the principal objectives aim was to sound out the ANC on its economic program and policies. For example, one of the four principle topics discussed

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<sup>1207</sup> *Ibid.*, 53

<sup>1208</sup> *Ibid.*; and J.D. Brewer, *Can South Africa Survive*, 54

<sup>1209</sup> Apartheid nervousness over the Dakar meeting, *Sechaba*, (1987), 1; *The Dakar Declaration*, (1987). Available at: <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/pr/1980s/pr870612.html>

<sup>1210</sup> *Ibid.*



at the 9-12 June 1987 Dakar meeting was “the economy of a liberated South Africa.”<sup>1211</sup> The aim was to ensure that the transition would not be revolutionary (read: socialist), therefore confining any change within capitalist parameters.

On 13 August 1987, in a speech before the South African Parliament, Botha condemned the Dakar meeting. He deemed the delegates “useful idiots” of the ANC, which planned to use the delegation as tools “to further the aims of the first phase of the revolution.”<sup>1212</sup> In November 1987, Botha emphasized that Pretoria would never negotiate the dissolution of apartheid with the ANC. He insisted that there be no unconditional dialogue with the ANC, demanding that it renounce the armed struggle against the apartheid state. Botha also declared that the ongoing contacts between South African organizations and the ANC would be monitored and measures instituted, including passport controls, in order “to prevent South Africans from becoming victims of this process.”<sup>1213</sup>

These growing contacts reflected the growing recognition among the South African elite that apartheid was not viable and black majority rule inevitable. Preoccupied about efforts to undermine policies designed to preserve apartheid, Botha was determined to prevent or, at least, neutralize any such contacts and initiatives. Riaan Labuschagne, an operative of the South African National Intelligence Service, observed that Botha’s fear was that the reformers would end up with “a government with a black majority and the disappearance of Afrikaner culture and community life.”<sup>1214</sup>

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<sup>1211</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1212</sup> H. Joffe, “PW waves the big stick”, *The Weekly Mail*, 14-20 August 1987

<sup>1213</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1214</sup> Labuschagne, *In South Africa’s Secret Service*, 226



Botha was not against contacts with the ANC or the imprisoned Mandela, if those contacts were part of a program aimed at disarticulating the liberation movement. In the middle of the 1980s there were secret contacts between the Botha government and Mandela. There were also secret contacts by Pretoria - through the National Security Service- with Thabo Mbeki. However, the government's purpose was not to discuss an end to apartheid and the transition to black majority. It refused to engage in substantive talks. For example, in 1986, Mandela made several overtures to Pretoria, proposing the commencement of serious discussions but they were to no avail. However, during the course of several meetings there were no "tangible results."<sup>1215</sup> Mandela expressed his frustration, declaring to one of the committee's representatives: "You don't have the power...I want to talk to the man with the power, and that is P.W. Botha. I want to talk to him."<sup>1216</sup> Botha's goal was to create and manipulate divisions (or the appearance of divisions) within the anti-apartheid struggle as a means by which to quell internal resistance. SADF General Groenewald neatly encapsulated this orientation: "You can thus only negotiate from a position of power. If we negotiate with the ANC with the purpose of eliminating it, that is acceptable. If we negotiate with the purpose of accommodating it, that is unacceptable."<sup>1217</sup>

### **CUITO CUANAVALÉ & THE SHIFTING OF THE REGIME**

Botha, nonetheless, was unable to prevent divisions among the South African elite becoming manifest in divisions within the NP, eventually spreading to his government.

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<sup>1215</sup> M. Meredith, *The Fate of Africa: From the Hopes of Freedom to the Heart of Despair: A History of 50 Years of Independence* (New York, 2005), 433

<sup>1216</sup> Meredith, *The Fate of Africa*, 433; P. Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle: The End of Apartheid and the Birth of the New South Africa* (London, 1997), 103

<sup>1217</sup> Quoted in N. L. Clark and W. H. Worger, *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (London, 2004), 102



A faction emerged advocating a policy of reform. This ‘reform’ wing was led by Foreign Minister “Pik” Botha, the Foreign Minister, and Constitutional Development Minister Chris Heunis. “Pik” Botha had come to believe that the existing policies were not viable. According to NIS agent Riaan Labuschagne, P.W. Botha, having become aware of his Foreign Minister’s shift, ordered surveillance of “Pik” Botha.<sup>1218</sup> In 1988, Eschel Rhoodie estimated that there were three camps in the NP: 27 MPs in favour of ending apartheid; 40 who were undecided (i.e., waiting to see how events would unfold so they could then choose the ‘winning side’) and 55 who were loyal to Botha.<sup>1219</sup>

What role did the events in Angola play in exacerbating and sharpening these divisions and tensions within the National Party and the Botha government? As illustrated in Chapters Four and Five, the SADF military reversals in 1988 fundamentally altered the regional military balance of power. This new ratio of forces had implications not only for Namibia but also for the regime within South Africa. Forced to withdraw from Angola, concede Namibia independence and accept its loss of military dominance, Pretoria could no longer pursue a military course of action. The retreat from Angola and the ceding of Namibia’s independence represented the definitive defeat of the “total strategy,” the policy that had been the apartheid state’s guiding framework for more than ten years. Moreover, participating in the talks leading to Namibian independence not only represented a new course, a radical departure, but also established a precedent for negotiation. *The Economist* reflected on the implications, observing that the negotiation process leading to Namibian independence would have an influence on white South

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<sup>1218</sup> Labuschagne, *In South Africa’s Secret Service*, 180

<sup>1219</sup> E. Rhoodie, *P.W. Botha: The Last Betrayal* (Melville, 1989), 213



Africans, who having seen “communists and blacks talking politely to their leaders” might “even start to wonder whether a black government would be so awful after all.”<sup>1220</sup>

Members of the NP and the government had to grapple not only with the defeat of total strategy but also with the realization that the loss of life and allocation of considerable resources had been in vain. Public support for a military solution to South Africa’s problems rested on a diminishing base of white public support. An *Umsebenzi* argued that this diminishing support and confidence in the SADF were reflected in white South Africa “by divisions, fear and uncertainty about the future.”<sup>1221</sup> The SADF’s claim to be the sole arbiters of what was best for South Africa had been under increasing challenge within the general white population, this challenge now reached into the ruling party’s circles. Having been the driving force behind “total strategy,” the SADF was inseparable from its failure and, thus, could not avoid a significant blow to its status. The defeat not only represented both a failure of *total strategy* (the framework, as outlined in Chapter One that guided the Botha regime) but also the discrediting of the SADF high command. The failure of *total strategy* equated to the failure of the SADF. The credibility of the SADF had suffered a severe blow. Shaun Johnson, a *TWM* reporter argued that due to the *débâcles* in Angola at Cuito Cuanavale and Caluque, the military “lost a great deal of prestige...”<sup>1222</sup>

It seems logical to assume that the members of parliament would have been influenced by the blow to the SADF’s stature and reputation, and the burgeoning white opposition to the war. As discussed in Chapters Four and Five, parliamentarians raised

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<sup>1220</sup> “The peace habit reaches Africa”, *The Economist*, 19 November 1988

<sup>1221</sup> Regional Conflicts and Political Solutions, *Umsebenzi*, ‘IV’ (1988), 1; See also “The peace habit reaches Africa”, *The Economist*, 19 November 1988

<sup>1222</sup> S. Johnson, “The hints are polite, but firm: PW must retire”, *The Weekly Mail*, 20-26 January 1989, 3



the subject of the anti-conscription campaign, the cost of the war and the mounting casualties. Opposition to the war was not only growing quantitatively but also qualitatively, spurring sectors of the population (such as women) that had would normally have remained outside the political fray (remaining quiescent and acquiescent) into organized action and public protest. This would have been a clear indication that the social consensus that the regime had forged on the necessity to intervene across the region and within South Africa's townships was increasingly under challenge and could eventually dissolve altogether.

Events in Angola represented more than a serious military setback. It would have become clear to politicians that the military program was no longer sustainable, in economic or political terms. As discussed in Chapter Five, not only had the SADF been outmaneuvered strategically but also Pretoria could no longer bear the financial costs of waging the war combined with growing public opposition fueled by mounting casualties. The military defeat in Angola contributed to the growing and unprecedented dissent within the ruling NP ranks. Previously, the civilian representatives of the regime were united behind and accepted their subordination to the military.

With the SADF defeat, civilian politicians from within and without the governing party increasingly challenged the SADF's privileged and paramount position in the state. Peter Wellman from *The Weekly Mail*, argued that due to the military setbacks, the contradictions between the military and civilian spheres sharpened, putting them "at loggerheads with each other as a result."<sup>1223</sup> One diplomat opined: "The generals blame the politicians for not agreeing for a strong enough force" necessary for victory in

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<sup>1223</sup> P. Wellman, "A front-line season of disasters for SA", *The Weekly Mail*, 8 - 14 July 1988



Angola.<sup>1224</sup> An *Umsebenzi* editorial concurred, stating that Cuito Cuanavale had exacerbated tensions within the apartheid regime, noting: “Politically they are more divided than ever before.”<sup>1225</sup> Some NP parliamentarians began publicly expressing their opposition to government policy. In November 1988, Albert Nothnagel and Lon Botha declared at a parliamentary session that the government would have to negotiate with the ANC.<sup>1226</sup> In January 1989, *Beheld*, the NP’s newspaper, posed a query that had so recently been unthinkable and diametrically opposed by Botha and the SADF high command: “Are talks between the government and an African National Congress delegation under the leadership of a free Nelson Mandela unthinkable?”<sup>1227</sup> *The Weekly Mail* reported that this view was becoming prevalent throughout the NP.<sup>1228</sup>

Unprecedented dissent within the ruling party was also matched by a change in Pretoria’s approach to the ANC, raising the level and tenor of its contacts with Mandela. On 9 December 1988, Mandela was moved into a house on the grounds of the Victor Versten prison in which a series of meetings with government officials was held. An unusual incident in January 1989 poignantly captured the fracturing of the regime’s approach. Piet Koornhof, South African Ambassador to the U.S., telephoned the ANC office in New York, ostensibly to aid in the funeral arrangements of an ANC official. John Makatin. Tebego Mafole, the head of the New York office, underlined the

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<sup>1224</sup> Wellman, *ibid.*

<sup>1225</sup> Regional Conflicts and Political Solutions, *Umsebenzi*, ‘IV’ (1988), 1

<sup>1226</sup> A. Harber, “The Two Nat Camps: One which will talk to the ANC, one which opposes talks”, *The Weekly Mail* 27 January – 2 February 1989,

<sup>1227</sup> Quoted in M. Swilling, “Quietly Thinking the Unthinkable”, *The Weekly Mail*. 20-26 January 1989

<sup>1228</sup> *Ibid.*



uniqueness of the act:

It's not every day that a representative of the South African government offers condolences to ANC members. Over the years we have had South African government forces crossing borders and attacking ANC personnel in neighbouring states. ANC members have been attacked, assassinated and threatened by forces related to the government. So we were surprised they should offer condolences to us.<sup>1229</sup>

However, the most important change was not in the behaviour of the regime towards the ANC, but in the eclipse of Botha and the eventual dislodging of the military from the centre of decision-making. The SADF's loss of prestige created the conditions for the repudiation of government policy from several previous supporters of the Botha regime, even from within the inner circle. This was evident in the varying political fortunes of Magnus Malan and F. W. De Klerk. In this context, the contestation for state power became sharp. Botha's splitting of the State and NP presidencies could not contain these contradictions, but merely allowed them to break into the open. On 2 February 1989, due to a stroke he suffered the month before (on 8 January) Botha resigned as president of the NP, while retaining the State Presidency. Botha expected his Finance Minister, Barend Du Plessis to succeed him as NP President. However, the party chose De Klerk. This rebuff of Botha reflected the shift of influence and control of the NP from Botha to De Klerk. For example, Chris Heunis, the leader of the NP in the Cape, and Stoffel Botha, the Natal leader, publicly endorsed De Klerk.<sup>1230</sup>

The contest for the State Presidency most clearly demonstrated this shift. A vote of the NP MPs would determine Botha's successor. Malan was seen as the main

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<sup>1229</sup> "The Day Dr. Piet Phoned", *The Weekly Mail*, 20-26 January 1989

<sup>1230</sup> "Ranks close behind FW", *Cape Times*, 10 February 1989



contender and, therefore, to be De Klerk's most serious rival for the post.<sup>1231</sup> As Botha's choice, Malan appeared to be his logical successor. Unlike Malan, De Klerk was considered a marginal figure in the regime, an outsider in the circles of the SSC. Botha distrusted De Klerk, suspecting he was not sufficiently committed to the policies that had been pursued over the past decade or to the preservation of apartheid. Botha's suspicions (fears) were confirmed by a speech De Klerk gave in February 1989 speech, declaring "white domination, in so far as it still exists must go," adding the caveat that white interests would be protected.<sup>1232</sup> In his autobiography, De Klerk stated that he was often excluded from the most important discussions.<sup>1233</sup> Whether these were self-serving statements, designed to distance him from the crimes of the regime, what is clear is that he was not part of Botha's inner circle. However, in March 1989, De Klerk once again emerged victorious over Botha's chosen candidate.

De Klerk's victory represented more than the definitive defeat of Malan (and by extension Botha); it also represented a categorical defeat for the SADF. Botha (a former defense minister) and Malan (then current Defense Minister, a SADF General and former SADF Chief of Staff) were seen as firmly ensconced in the military. As General Georg Meiring, Chief of Staff of the South African Army, noted Malan's "powerbase was the military."<sup>1234</sup> Botha's protégé, Malan, was seen as the SADF candidate. This was to prove to be his undoing. The SADF's defeat had precipitated a leadership contest whose

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<sup>1231</sup> A. Kamsteg and E. Van Dijk, *F.W. De Klerk: Man of the Moment* (Cape Town, 1990), 45

<sup>1232</sup> A. Johnson, "De Klerk's vergligte speech", *Cape Times*, 9 February 1989

<sup>1233</sup> De Klerk (1998), 116-118; C. McGreal, "Apartheid-era murder of sleeping teenagers returns to haunt De Klerk: Spotlight turns again on what last white president knew of hit squads", *The Guardian*, 6 August 2007

<sup>1234</sup> Quoted in Hamann, *Day of the Generals*, xii



result Botha could not predetermine or control. Having invested so much time and resources in the drive to dominate the region and hold on to Namibia, the conclusive defeat of this military doctrine could not but be the political ruin of those who been its chief proponents and architects.

Several contemporary newspaper accounts attributed Malan's eclipse by De Klerk to the SADF's military setbacks. *The Economist* argued that Angolan military events had profound repercussions in Pretoria, particularly on Magnus Malan. According to *The Economist*, Malan appeared to be in control of Pretoria's external affairs, "running his own foreign policy – until his Angolan offensive ran out of puff."<sup>1235</sup> With the failure of the military, Malan was "poisoned by diplomacy," finding himself increasingly marginalized from decision-making.<sup>1236</sup> *The Weekly Mail*'s Shaun Johnson asserted that Malan's position was an immediate 'casualty' of the SADF's defeat, with his presidential ambitions dealt a mortal blow.<sup>1237</sup> O'Meara directly attributed Malan's political decline to the military setbacks in Angola.<sup>1238</sup>

ANC analysts argued that the regime's leadership crisis represented a significant qualitative change. They viewed the divisions within the South African elite as propitious and favourable to the liberation movement, directly linking them to the SADF military setbacks in Angola. Neil Zumana argued that Cuito Cuanavale had created a favourable terrain for the liberation movement: "The demoralising defeat of the SADF at

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<sup>1235</sup> "The struggle behind South Africa's smile", *The Economist*, 17 September 1988

<sup>1236</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1237</sup> S. Johnson, "The hints are polite, but firm: PW must retire", *The Weekly Mail*, 20-26 January 1989, 3

<sup>1238</sup> D. O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, 398



Cuito Cuanavale, the implementation of Resolution 435 in Namibia, have great significance for our struggle.”<sup>1239</sup> An April 1989 *Sechaba* editorial observed, “not Botha, not De Klerk, not Heunis, dare address the real problems looming behind their ‘leadership crisis’ and their confusion. They don’t talk about their defeat at Cuito Cuanavale.”<sup>1240</sup> The apartheid government was “in disarray, and pulling in different directions.”<sup>1241</sup>

The stage for Botha’s eclipse and the rise of F.W. De Klerk - the “reluctant reformer,” who as government minister “was notoriously right wing”<sup>1242</sup> - was now set. The marginalization of Botha’s inner circle and those who remained loyal to him was completed when, in short order, many of them retired from active politics. Chief among these was Finance Minister Barend Du Plessis, heralding Botha’s own marginalization. For his part, Botha refused to vacate the State Presidency. The expectation was that when the new State President was chosen, Botha, instead of serving out his full-term, would resign, stepping aside for the new office holder. Nonetheless, Botha opted to serve out his constitutional term, which expired in September 1989. However, the marginalization and defection of his most trusted confidants rendered his position untenable. Botha’s decision to stay in office merely highlighted that the levers of power within the South African state had passed into new hands. Even though he still formally held onto the State presidency, it was De Klerk who was increasingly in control of the South African government: a reality that De Klerk readily demonstrated. On 26 May 1989, De Klerk declared that serious reforms were necessary and unavoidable. He then undertook a visit

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<sup>1239</sup> N. Zumana, Discussion Article: Revolution or Negotiations, *Sechaba*, (1989), 20

<sup>1240</sup> Editorial: The Racists Have Problems, *Sechaba*, (1989), 1

<sup>1241</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1242</sup> A. Harber, “PW Stuns the Nats”, *The Weekly Mail*, 3-9 February 1989



of western Europe, emphasizing that Pretoria was adopting a new approach.

Clear evidence of the power shift was the conflict that emerged in the cabinet and the NP over foreign policy. De Klerk and 'Pik' Botha began to conduct foreign policy independently of P.W. Botha. This was dramatically demonstrated when public disagreement broke out between Botha and De Klerk over De Klerk's proposed 28 August 1989 visit to Lusaka to talk with President Kaunda. Botha's criticism of and opposition to the trip was to no avail. In a 2 June 1989 letter, Botha described his marginalization from the decision-making process: "I am informed of policy statements that completely ignore the State President. I am also informed of proposed foreign visits by you [De Klerk] without complying with the prescribed rules."<sup>1243</sup> In a 14 August 1989 television broadcast, Botha denounced the planned visit as playing into the hands of South Africa's enemies: "The ANC is enjoying the protection of President Kaunda and is planning insurgency activities against South Africa from Lusaka."<sup>1244</sup>

Under these conditions, Botha said he could not continue as State President, announcing his resignation because: "It is evident to me that after all these years of my best efforts for the National Party and for the government of this country, as well as the security of our country, I am being ignored by ministers serving in my cabinet."<sup>1245</sup> While, both De Klerk and 'Pik' Botha disputed the claim that they had failed to inform the State President, it was clear that P.W. Botha was increasingly politically irrelevant. From being able to brag that he could dictate to the editor of *Beeld* (the largest Afrikaans

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<sup>1243</sup> W. Claiborne, "Botha Quits, Criticizes Successor", *Washington Post*, 15 August 1989

<sup>1244</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1245</sup> *Ibid.*



language newspaper), what to write, Botha was now a figure on the sidelines of South African power.<sup>1246</sup> On the very next day, 15 August 1989, De Klerk officially assumed the State Presidency. Botha's resignation allowed de Klerk to assume the full formal reins of power, which marked the definitive ascendancy of the 'reformers' and the permanent eclipse of the militarists. While, Botha's stroke had greatly diminished his political influence, preventing him from playing a significant role in choosing his replacement, the decline of his political power had begun well before the dramatic decline in his health. It seems unlikely that had his health not deteriorated he would have retained the necessary political influence to orchestrate the election of his chosen successor, Malan.

The regime's interaction with the ANC (particularly, Mandela) also seem to have been given by the military events in Angola impetus, resulting in the initiation of serious discussions by Pretoria with Mandela. A source (who held a relatively high position in South Africa but wished to maintain anonymity in both name and organizational affiliation) said that he witnessed the first and only meeting between Botha (while he held the presidency) and Mandela that was held on 5 July 1989. Notwithstanding, Botha's increasing political irrelevance, Mandela allegedly told Botha something to the effect: "You are only meeting with me because of what happened in Angola at Cuito Cuanavale."<sup>1247</sup> While the person's status would not preclude him from having been part of that important meeting, there is no direct confirmation from other sources that this person was present or that Mandela made this particular declaration. However, Mandela made several subsequent statements that unequivocally express the conviction that the

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<sup>1246</sup> Rhodie, *P.W. Botha*, 278

<sup>1247</sup> Interview with anonymous source, 31 July 2006



SADF military setbacks had forced Pretoria to hold serious negotiations with him. For example, in 1991, Mandela said that Cuito Cuanavale “was crucial in bringing Pretoria to realise it would have to talk.”<sup>1248</sup> Other leading ANC members also concur with that statement.<sup>1249</sup> Ronnie Kasrils, who was part of the ANC negotiating team, stated “Cuito Cuanavale changed the chemistry of the contacts between Pretoria and the ANC. They became serious and substantive for the first time.”<sup>1250</sup>

Whatever, the reasons behind Botha’s 5 July meeting with Mandela, on August 21, 1989, the ANC issued the Harare Declaration, laying out the following preconditions for negotiations: 1. Unconditional release of political prisoners; 2. Unbanning the ANC and other anti-apartheid organizations; 3. Removal of the troops from the townships; 4. An end of the state of emergency; 5. Repeal of repressive legislation; and 6. Cessation of political trials and executions. The Declaration was released at that time because the ANC leadership had analyzed that there was now a favourable “conjuncture of circumstances.”<sup>1251</sup> A discussion paper in the August 1989 *Sechaba* issue elaborated on this analysis, noting “the ascendancy of the civilian politicians at the expense of the military men following the defeat of the racist army at Cuito Cuanavale.”<sup>1252</sup> The conclusion drawn was that Pretoria now faced no alternative but to engage in meaningful

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<sup>1248</sup> N. Mandela, *Nelson Mandela Speaks: Forging a Democratic Non-Racist South Africa* (New York, 1993), 124

<sup>1249</sup> See for example T. Mbeki, Letter from President Thabo Mbeki: Cuba’s selfless contribution to African liberation driven by a genuine and passionate humanism, *ANC Today*, 30 March - 5 April 2001. Accessed at <http://www.anc.org.zalancdocs/anctoday/2001/at10.htm>

<sup>1250</sup> Interview with Ronnie Kasrils

<sup>1251</sup> A. Hadland and J. Rantao. *The Life and Times of Thabo Mbeki* (Cape Town, 1999), 61

<sup>1252</sup> Mzala, Negotiations and People’s Power, *Sechaba*, August 1989, 21



negotiations: “Only when its forces are put into crisis, does the Pretoria regime reach the conclusion that it may have to talk. That is how it was obliged to accept that the Namibian question must be resolved on the basis of UN Resolution 435.”<sup>1253</sup>

The first official government contact with the ANC regarding the discussion of the commencement of meaningful negotiations (talks about talks) was made by the NIS on September 6, 1989.<sup>1254</sup> On 9 October, it was announced that eight ANC prisoners would be released. In November 1989, De Klerk took the step that clearly delineated his government from Botha: disbanding the National Security Management System. He downgraded the SSC, relegating it to a committee directly under and subordinate to the cabinet. The political arrangements and the militarized apartheid state that Botha had presided over since 1977 had come to an end. While Malan continued to serve as defense minister until 1991, he no longer played a significant role in charting foreign or domestic policy. In July 1991, De Klerk removed him from his post, giving him the much less influential post of Minister for Water Affairs and Forestry. Ostensibly his removal from the defense portfolio was due to his involvement in a scandal of providing covert funds to the Inkatha Freedom Party, as part of a plan of undermining the ANC.

De Klerk’s new approach signaled the emergence of a new political discourse and praxis that necessarily entailed the subordination of the SSC and the SSC to civilian authority. Chester Crocker, who had worked very closely with the Botha government, underscored the significance of this change. He contrasted the de Klerk’s government with Botha’s, noting that “the cabinet had been restored to its proper position as the top policy council and the military-led administrative organs were being abolished...The era

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<sup>1253</sup> *Ibid.*, 25

<sup>1254</sup> Hadland and Rantao, *The Life and Times*, 64



when South Africa's white politicians expect their soldiers and policemen to "solve" their problems was coming to an end."<sup>1255</sup> The November 1989 *Phambili* agreed, contending that Namibia's independence had opened the way to the final dissolution of apartheid.<sup>1256</sup> After Luanda's request for Cuban reinforcements "the nose of the SADF was bloodied."<sup>1257</sup> As a result of the defeat and Namibian independence, the apartheid regime faced the worst crisis "of its kind in South Africa's history."<sup>1258</sup> This crisis could only be resolved by "talking to the ANC."<sup>1259</sup> In December 1989 it became very clear to Mandela that "some change was imminent."<sup>1260</sup> He was moved to a cottage and allowed to have contact with the ANC in Lusaka. This was the prelude to his 11 February 1990 unconditional release from prison, leading to full-fledged negotiations, which with all its twists and turns, including efforts to undermine and weaken the ANC through covert state sponsored violence, eventually resulted in the dismantling of apartheid and the emergence of black majority rule.

The analysis by anti-apartheid organizations that the military situation in Angola had proven decisive in forcing South African ruling circles to the negotiating table was also reflected by several articles in the western media, which also argued for a substantive connection, attributing to Cuito Cuanavale and its consequences a direct

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<sup>1255</sup> Crocker, *High Noon In Southern Africa*, 489 & 490

<sup>1256</sup> Namibia Shall Be Free, *Phambili*, November 1989, 17

<sup>1257</sup> *Ibid.*, 21

<sup>1258</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1259</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1260</sup> N. Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (New York, 1995), 543



causal role in the demise of the apartheid system. For example, Rich Dowden, in an article titled “Who gets the credit for Mandela’s release” published in *The Independent*, singled out Cuito Cuanavale as a critical juncture that demonstrated the non-viability of the apartheid regime:

Those who thought South Africa could hold out in its laager by military might were proved wrong at the battle of Cuito Cuanavale, in Angola in 1988, when the South African Defence Force found itself trapped and outgunned by Cubans and Angolans armed with superior Soviet weaponry.<sup>1261</sup>

The failure of the SADF was seen as finally exhausting Pretoria’s capacity to defend the *status quo*. Richard Martin, in *The Globe and Mail* (considered Canada’s national and most influential newspaper) observed, “by pulling out of Namibia, by releasing Mr. Mandela the de Klerk government is admitting that it no longer possesses the will or the ability to preserve apartheid.”<sup>1262</sup> Within this context, Martin argued, the “major defeat at Cuito Cuanavale...was a historical turning point,” as it led South Africa to withdraw from Angola and to agree to independence to Namibia.”<sup>1263</sup> Linda Freeman, a Carleton University political science professor, presented one of the clearest expositions on the significance of Cuito Cuanavale. Among the five factors that Freeman listed as leading to the eventual release of Mandela and the beginning of formal negotiations to end apartheid, she gave primacy to Cuito Cuanavale.<sup>1264</sup> Vital developments were the

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<sup>1261</sup> R. Dowden, “Who gets the credit for Mandela’s release”, *The Independent*, 12 February 1990

<sup>1262</sup> R. Martin, “The unraveling of apartheid: From Sharpeville’s massacre to a free Namibia”, *The Globe and Mail*, 31 March 1990

<sup>1263</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1264</sup> L. Freeman, “Mandela - Free at Last? Free at Last?” *The Globe and Mail*, 20 January 1990



“dismantling of the National Security Management System” that operated “as a shadow government dominated by senior military officials,” the reduction in both military spending and compulsory military service and an end to the regional destabilization war.<sup>1265</sup> She asserted:

South Africa’s defeat at Cuito Cuanavale in Angola in 1988 was a key event in the displacement of the military from the centre of power and the decision to grant independence to Namibia. Too many young white soldiers had died. Sanctions had crippled South Africa’s ability to finance the war and to possess the latest military technology.<sup>1266</sup>

The loss of power had a significant psychological impact on the SADF and the rest of the security apparatus. De Klerk’s release of Mandela and unbanning of the ANC and the SACP generated disorientation among the ranks of those who had committed themselves to the use of force to preserve the system of white supremacy. De Kock noted: “There was confusion, especially in the security establishment, and a sense of total sell-out by then government...We had just to look at what had happened in SWA/Namibia to see a mirror of what was about to happen to us.”<sup>1267</sup> As would be expected, many SADF generals opposed the loss of state control. Rumours spread that several members of the high command had considered organizing a coup. However, the seriousness, depth, breadth and extent of these plans remain unclear and in dispute.<sup>1268</sup>

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<sup>1265</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1266</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1267</sup> De Kock, *A Long Night’s Damage*, 285-286

<sup>1268</sup> Hamann, *Day of the Generals*, 209-213



## CUBA

From 1975 to 1991, more than 330,000 Cubans served in the Angolan military mission. Havana has acknowledged 2016 deaths.<sup>1269</sup> This figure is disputed, with some positing death figures as high 10,000.<sup>1270</sup> Interviews with Cuban veterans, however, supported the lower Cuban figures. They emphasized Havana's policy of minimizing casualties when possible.<sup>1271</sup> Nevertheless, the contention over the number of deaths aside, it is quite evident that the Angolan experience has marked Cuba in a profound manner. It is continually evoked as the central exemplification of revolutionary values. As noted in the introductory chapter, Cuito Cuanavale and the Cuba's role in Angola have become integral to the Cuban national narrative. In a sense, perhaps, not intended, George is correct in stating that Cuba has mythologized and constructed "the myth of Cuito Cuanavale."<sup>1272</sup>

However, far and above the inflation of its "importance"<sup>1273</sup> in service of the Castro government's political purposes, the Cuban role in Angola has assumed a meaning beyond politics. Contrary to George's assertion that Havana "has erased Angola from public memory,"<sup>1274</sup> Cuban society is suffused with the recollections of the

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<sup>1269</sup> "Testimonio grafico del masivo y solemne homenaje a los heroes en las provincias", *Granma* 9 December 1989

<sup>1270</sup> George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, 268 & 342; '10,000 Cubans Reported Killed in Angola War', *Los Angeles Times*, 16 June 1987

<sup>1271</sup> See also George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, 268

<sup>1272</sup> George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, 213 & 234

<sup>1273</sup> *Ibid.*, 234-235

<sup>1274</sup> George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, 282



*internacionalistas*. The Cuban government has not, as George asserted, “chosen to forget its internationalists operations in Angola,” nor have its Cuban participants “been swept under the carpet.”<sup>1275</sup> Indeed, while its motives may be debated and challenged, it is indisputable that the revolutionary government continues to expend significant time and resources in the valorization of the Cuban role in Angola, firmly embedding the Angolan mission within popular consciousness.

The purchase of the war in Angola on Cuban popular consciousness is indicated by the popularity of books published about the subject. Most have been personal memoirs. These publications tend to sell out very quickly, leading to some being very difficult to find once they are released. For example, the author has had to ask friends in Cuba to search for certain titles. There has been a considerable output as indicated by this far from complete sample: *Secretos de Generales*, *Al Ecuentro de Los Desconocido*, *Angola: Relatos Desde Las Alturas*, *La Guerra de Angola*, *La Paz de Cuito Cuanavale: documetos de un processo*, *Angola: Un Abril Como Giron*, *Angola: Fin del Mito de Los Mercenarios*, *Angola: Saeta del Norte*, *Operacion Carlota: Pasajes de una epopeya*, *Cangamba*, *Victoria Al Sur De Angola*. There are a number of other memoirs and accounts that are awaiting publication. For example, Eduardo Sarria Gonzalez, author of *Angola: Relatos Desde Las Alturas*, has penned a second volume.

Several documentaries have been produced. The 1989 *La Repuesta a la Escalada de Sud-Africa* (Response to the South African Escalation),<sup>1276</sup> which dealt with the final battles in Angola in 1988, was re-broadcast several times due to popular demand. In

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<sup>1275</sup> *Ibid.*, 282 & 285

<sup>1276</sup> *La Repuesta a la Escalada de Sud-Africa* (Havana: FAR, 1989).



2007, a twenty-two episode series on the internationalist mission in Angola was produced, *La Epopeya de Angola* (The Epic of Angola).<sup>1277</sup> It gripped the attention of Cubans. In addition to the books and documentaries, there have been numerous commemorations. The main organizer of many of these events is the *Asociación de Combatientes de la Revolución* (Association of the Combatants of the Cuban Revolution). It was founded in 1993 and is comprised of those who fought in the Cuban 1956-59 revolutionary war, against the Escambray insurgency in the 1960s and in foreign campaigns. One of its primary objectives is to preserve the integrity of the historical memory of Cuba's various internationalist military missions.

In November 2005, Fidel Castro addressed a major event marking the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Cuba's military intervention in Angola.<sup>1278</sup> On March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2008, Raul Castro presided over a major ceremony that re-iterated the internationalist mission in Angola (as embodied in the victory at Cuito Cuanavale) as a defining period in the trajectory of the Cuban Revolution.<sup>1279</sup> Every year in Havana on May 4<sup>th</sup>, the *Organización de Solidaridad de los Pueblos de África, Asia y América* (Organization of Solidarity With the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America) organizes an event commemorating the May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1978 massacre at the Angolan town of Kassinga of hundreds of Namibian refugees by South African troops. This event is attended by official representatives from Angola, Namibia, South Africa and Cuba and receives wide

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<sup>1277</sup> *La Epopeya de Angola* (Havana: CubaInformacionTV, 2007)

<sup>1278</sup> Fidel Castro, *Speech at the Ceremony Commemorating the 30th Anniversary of the Cuban Military Mission in Angola and the 49th Anniversary of the landing of the Granma, Revolutionary Armed Forces Day* (Havana: Council of State, 2005)

<sup>1279</sup> Alberto Nunez Betancourt, Alberto, "Preside Raúl acto de conmemoración por la victoria en Cuito Cuanavale", *Granma*, 25 March 2008



coverage in the Cuban media. A central theme of this annual event is the Cuban contribution to the defeat of the apartheid regime.

Perhaps, it was during the crisis of the 1990s that internationalism was to have its most decisive impact *inside* Cuba. As the Cuban Revolution was caught in the maelstrom that ensued from the collapse of the Soviet Union and East Bloc, its very legitimacy and relevancy was called into question. The ideological pressures on the island were intense. Internationalism was one of the factors that contributed to the resilience of the Revolution, especially its perceived role in the defeat of the apartheid regime. Cubans took considerable pride in what their country had done in Angola. This pride was not just expressed by soldiers, who often spoke about "returning to Cuba with victory in our hands."<sup>1280</sup> Samuel Fure Davis, who did not serve in the military, stated: "There was lots of excitement about the battle. Word of victory was received with elation. I remember vividly the celebrations of the victory."<sup>1281</sup> Cubans not only took pride in their victory but in the altruism that characterized the Angolan mission. Nacyra Gomez stated: "Some do not understand our presence in a country out of solidarity...We are not there to kill but to defend another people, To fight for others and to die for others."<sup>1282</sup>

Nelson Mandela's July 25<sup>th</sup> –27<sup>th</sup> 1991 visit was also a great source of pride. Mandela's choice of Cuba as one of the first countries outside of Africa to visit after his release from prison was seen as further validation and affirmation of the Cuban Revolution. The resolution of the Cuban Council of State conferring the José Martí Medal, Cuba highest honour on Mandela noted that he was visiting at a "decisive hour

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<sup>1280</sup> Bravo, *Fidel: The Untold Story*

<sup>1281</sup> Interview with Samuel Fure Davis. Havana, 4 May, 2007

<sup>1282</sup> Bravo, *After the Battle*



when the Cuba people have resolved to defend at all costs the revolution, socialism and the homeland...”<sup>1283</sup> In his July 26<sup>th</sup>, 1991 speech at Matanzas, Mandela unequivocally acknowledged Cuba’s vital role in southern African liberation struggles, declaring: “The Cuban people hold a special place in the hearts of the people of Africa. The Cuban internationalists have made a contribution to African independence, freedom and justice unparalleled for its principled and selfless character.”<sup>1284</sup> He also expressed his support and admiration for the Cuban Revolution, stating: “We admire the sacrifices of the Cuban people in maintaining their independence and sovereignty in the face of a vicious imperialist-orchestrated campaign to destroy the impressive gains made in the Cuban Revolution.”<sup>1285</sup>

The significance of Cuito Cuanavale can, also, be appreciated by contemplating what the impact inside Cuba would have been if the result had been reversed. Fidel Castro characterized the commitment to the battles of 1987-88 as a decisive period for the Cuban Revolution because “the Revolution was also at stake and a different outcome would have meant a major defeat for the Revolution.”<sup>1286</sup> During Mandela’s visit to Cuba, Castro again accentuated the dangers that Cuba faced, declaring that “the revolution put everything at stake, it put its own existence at stake; it risked a huge battle

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<sup>1283</sup> Cuban Council of State, An eloquent testimony of the solidarity between our two peoples: Resolution of the Cuban Council of State, 71-73 in Nelson Mandela & Fidel Castro, *How Far We Slaves Have Come!* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1991), 72

<sup>1284</sup> Mandela, Nelson, We will Ensure that the poor and rightless will rule the land of their birth, 17-28 in Nelson Mandela & Fidel Castro, *How Far We Slaves Have Come!* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1991), 18

<sup>1285</sup> *Ibid.*, 18

<sup>1286</sup> *Case 1/1989*, 394



against one of the strongest powers."<sup>1287</sup> An official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs concurred: "A defeat at Cuito Cuanavale would have had a devastating psychological and moral impact on the Cuban people."<sup>1288</sup> Consonant with this assessment is that the decisive military engagements in Angola occurred *before* the dissolution of the Soviet Union. If the war had not been decided at that time and had continued, the Cuban armed forces, which were dependent on the Soviet Union for material and diplomatic support, would have been left in an isolated and precarious situation. They would have been stranded in Angola:

"What is often not mentioned is that if the U.S. had only know that the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc would collapse in just two years, then the Washington would not have pressured South Africa to negotiate. It would have left the Cuban troops in Angola to fight on alone without any support. *What I mean it is quite an important factor that things were settled then and there at that time. Could you imagine Cuban troops in 1990 and 1991 fighting in Angola with no support from the Soviet Union? Could you imagine Cuba entering the Special Period with over fifty thousand troops fighting in Angola? It would have been catastrophic for the Revolution!*" (emphasis added).<sup>1289</sup>

But the Cuban armed forces returned victorious. The status of the Cuba armed forces in popular consciousness, which was already high, was enhanced. The high standing of *FAR* among the people was important during the Special period as the military assumed an expanded role throughout the economy and society. It was one of the principal organizations mobilized to preserve ideological and political unity. The values of self-sacrifice and social solidarity that were the leadership's watchwords of the early 1990s,

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<sup>1287</sup> Fidel Castro, *We will never return to the slave barracks*, 31-68 in Nelson Mandela & Fidel Castro, *How Far We Slaves Have Come!* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1991), 34-35

<sup>1288</sup> Interview with Cuban Official, 3 May 2007. Anonymity retained.

<sup>1289</sup> *Ibid.*



were the values that FAR embodied: values crystallized in the *internacionalistas*. The *internacionalistas*, particularly those who were returning, had performed operationalized those values in Angola and now reinforced those principles in Cuba.

No political or ideological crisis developed.<sup>1290</sup> The contribution of the island's internationalist record (especially in Angola) to avoiding just such a crisis should not be underestimated. As the Revolution was portrayed as a relic with no meaningful role in the world, Cuba's crucial contribution to South Africa's transformation was a potent counter. It fortified belief in the Revolution's relevance and legitimacy in a world that was radically different from the one into which it was born and had lived in. Perhaps, the most poignant deployment of internationalism in defence of the Cuban Revolution was Fidel Castro's 2003 May Day speech. The context for the speech was the intense criticism of Cuba for the arrest of seventy-five government opponents and the execution of three armed hijackers in March and April 2003. Several prominent intellectuals and world personalities publicly broke with and condemned the Revolution, questioning its very legitimacy. In response, Castro delivered a speech that covered the island's extensive internationalist missions in detail, particularly, its assistance to national liberation movements.<sup>1291</sup> The war in Angola was given special attention. The speech amounted to a comprehensive presentation of the Revolution's *curriculum vitae*; it was a riposte to those who damned and dismissed it. Thus, what the Cuba Revolution had done

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<sup>1290</sup> For a detailed discussion of the crisis of the 1990s in Cuba see Louis Perez, Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 291-336 and Isaac Saney, *Cuba: A Revolution In Motion* (London: Zed, 2004), 21-40 & 58-68

<sup>1291</sup> See Fidel Castro "Speech given by Commander In Chief, Fidel Castro Ruz, President of the Republic of Cuba, at the May Day Rally, Revolution Square, Havana, may 1, 2003," 39-53 in *Ideas Are Worth More Than Weapons* (La Habana: Editora Politica, 2003)



- and does - on a world scale was presented as contributions that unequivocally establish its legitimacy and validity. This perspective was reflected in numerous articles published in *Granma* in the lead-up to and during the commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the battles around Cuito Cuanavale.

## **GENERAL SUMMATION**

The Botha regime in the form of the SSC had an overweening confidence that it could impose its will on the region and act with impunity; in short, it believed in its military invincibility. Not only could it not envisage a military defeat, it could not understand that a significant military setback would and could redound inside South Africa to the detriment of the regime. The defeat of the SADF destroyed the myth of South African invincibility, which was integral to Pretoria's capacity to justify its military actions and policies domestically. In many ways, the Botha regime's legitimacy in the eyes of apartheid's partisans (both within ruling circles and the general white population) was based on its alleged invincibility. SADF Major General Chris Thirion, perhaps, intuitively appreciated the dangers of losing the invincibility cloak, when he stated that he always had misgiving about the escalating level of SADF commitment to the Cuito Cuanavale theatre of action: "I thought we should not have become involved to the extent we became involved."<sup>1292</sup> Once the regime's invincibility was demonstrated, doubt about its ability to run South African affairs diminished its power.

The retreats and concession in the military sphere led to retreats and concessions in the political sphere. Central to this process was the military's removal from the centre of power. The failure of the war in Angola meant the discrediting of the policy behind it, weakening the power of the SADF within the state and government. The authority of the

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<sup>1292</sup> Interview with Major General Chris Thirion



Botha regime (crystallized in the SSC) clashed with the objective conditions: the SSC's authority rested on the SADF and the efficacy of pursuing a military solution, but the reality of the defeat in Angola destroyed the basis upon which the legitimacy of this authority rested. A South African victory would have validated the militarist strategy and consolidated the military's hold on the reins of state power. The defeat had the obverse effect: it significantly weakened the military's ability to dominate the government.

As the Botha regime, had invested so much time (more than a decade) and resources in the military strategy, the defeat of Pretoria's campaign to subjugate the region's independent states had profound repercussions inside the country, both on the internal resistance and South African ruling circles. An immediate 'casualty' of this state of affairs was Defence Minister Magnus Malan's presidential ambitions. As apartheid's existence rested on violence - domestically and regionally - Cuito Cuanavale represented not only a military defeat, but a crucial geo-strategic blow that signalled to South African ruling circles that the costs (financial, political and human) of maintaining the apartheid regime were too high to sustain. The reality that De Klerk planned to (or thought he could) outmanoeuvre the ANC in the negotiation process and fundamentally weaken and undermine is clear. But the arena of negotiations was not the favoured terrain of the Afrikaner ruling circles: they had perforce to accept it.

The placing of Cuito Cuanavale at the centre of the political process that led to the demise of the Botha/SADF regime is not a monocausal argument. The point is not to ignore or minimize the structural context. Cuito Cuanavale occurred within a constellation of factors: Black resistance, economic stagnation, international sanctions, overall economic and diplomatic isolation. As argued in Chapter Five, the military events in Angola interacted with the economy and South Africa's internal situation.



Given the confluence of so many factors and the multi-faceted crisis that confronted the apartheid system, it seems almost illogical to point to one single factor or cause for the dissolution of the apartheid regime.

At the time of the 1987-88 military engagements in Angola, Botha and his clique seemed committed to maintaining their grip on state power. Despite, opposition from the majority of the capitalist class and increasing dissent from within the ranks of his own party and ministers, the SSC was still the locus of power and it was in the hands of Botha and his military allies. The regime was firmly entrenched in state power and determined and convinced that it could preserve apartheid by achieving regional hegemony, and was only committed to making cosmetic changes. The program to crush the anti-apartheid movement within and without South Africa remained in full force and effect.

The mounting pressures (internal and external) and structural contradictions rendered apartheid unsustainable in the long-term. As the economy deteriorated and South Africa's international isolation increased, Botha could not prevent fissures within apartheid's South Africa's dominant class widening into significant fault-lines. South Africa faced profound and irresolvable economic problems and demographic challenges generated by the apartheid system.<sup>1293</sup> Where and how do the military events in Angola fit within the constellation and concatenation of these structural contradictions?

Thus, the question remains: Why at a particular time (1988-1989) Botha and the military became marginalized and displaced from state power? The evidence seems to suggest that a plausible answer to this question is: The defeat of the SADF in Angola was the catalyst precipitating the end of the Botha regime, leading to F.W. de Klerk's

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<sup>1293</sup> For example, Feinstein, *An Economic History of South Africa*, 224-251, Fieldhouse, *Anti-Apartheid*, 486-487; Iliffe, *Africans*, 284-285



rise to power. Structural pressures opened rifts in the South African ruling bloc but the military setbacks proved decisive in shifting the balance of power between the contesting factions in favour of the reformers.

It is in the context of the drive for regional hegemony (of which the war in Angola was central) and the particular mode of governance that had emerged in South Africa under Botha that the impact battle of Cuito Cuanavale must be understood. The specific nature of the apartheid state (its militarization) under Botha rendered it particularly vulnerable to developments in the military sphere. By wedding itself to the *total strategy* program and fashioning the state instrument to wield that program, Pretoria not only hinged the preservation of white rule on achieving regional hegemony, but also ensured that the definitive failure of this program would have decisive, if not fatal, consequences, for regime.

## **CONCLUSION**

The contribution of this dissertation is to present the war in Angola waged by the SADF between 1975 and 1988 (especially, the battle of Cuito Cuanavale) in a different light. By adducing new evidence, while at the same time reconsidering and recasting evidence that has long been available, it places the military events of 1987-88 in a new analytical context. If Angolan voices are largely absent from the preceding narrative, it is because the Cubans and South Africans were the principal protagonists, producing the major accounts of the war. As the 1987-88 conflict developed it became a trial of strength and strategy between Havana and Pretoria. Nevertheless, the lack of Angolan voices represents a lacuna that needs to be addressed in subsequent research.

The struggle for and against apartheid took place as much outside as inside South Africa, with the war in Angola the most important external arena. The defeat of the SADF at Cuito Cuanavale also occurred as the apartheid system faced continuing



economic decline, growing white popular disenchantment and increasing international pressure. This context transformed the battle from a merely military event to one of regional-geopolitical dimensions that enabled it to become the accelerant for the demise of apartheid. Cuito Cuanavale was not only decisive for the independence of Namibia, but also a direct contributor to apartheid's dissolution. The military setbacks in Angola could not but have had a significant impact on the apartheid state. Pretoria had invested so much institutionally, temporally and economically in the military strategy that any defeat of the campaign to subjugate the region's independent states would have had to have profound repercussions inside the country: both on South African ruling circles and the internal resistance. This was the vulnerability of the regime. Serious military defeat or setback threatened the integrity and legitimacy of the entire structure that had been developed and elaborated under Botha and the SADF.

Throughout its history new stresses and strains emerged and old ones were exacerbated within the apartheid system. However, the Cuban intervention to defend Angolan independence and to challenge South African regional dominance was unanticipated. It introduced a new dynamic, over and above the South African internal contradictions: a new dynamic that the Botha regime was unable to plan for and to successfully counteract. Cuba's role in the 1987-88 conflict in Angola extended beyond the sheer numerical dimensions of the island's troop and materiel commitment. Cuba brought to bear a strategic vision, which had an indelible and decisive impact on the course of events. Havana's assumption of leadership of all the armed forces in southern Angola arrayed against the SADF changed the overall strategic approach. Havana combined the tactics necessary for the joint Cuban-Angolan effort to successfully repel the SADF with a strategy designed to bring an end to Pretoria's military adventures beyond South Africa's borders. This resulted in stripping the apartheid military system of



its impunity, which, in turn, unleashed what proved to be unstoppable pressures that would eventually sideline the State Security Council in spearheading unceasing repression of domestic anti-apartheid social and political forces.

There are all sorts or types of events that transpire outside a country that may have an impact inside that country, but not all events are an existential threat. Cuito Cuanavale and its aftermath (the outflanking Cuban/Angolan drive to and military build-up on the Angolan/Namibian border) posed just such an existential threat. Cuito Cuanavale was much more consequential for the end of apartheid than generally acknowledged; it was an integral part of apartheid's death throes. Together with the Sharpeville Massacre, the Rivonia Trial and the Soweto Uprising, Cuito Cuanavale is one of the most important chronological markers in the struggle against apartheid.



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<i>No.</i>	<i>Box No.</i>	<i>SANDF File ref.</i>	<i>Vol.</i>	<i>Subject</i>	<i>Period (mm/dd/yy)</i>
1.	8	SVR 1/87	1	Security State Council	02/02/87
2.	8	SVR 2/87	1	State Security Council	16/02/87
<i>No.</i>	<i>Box No.</i>	<i>SADF File ref.</i>	<i>Vol.</i>	<i>Subject</i>	<i>Period (mm/dd/yy)</i>
3.	8	SVR 3/87	1	State Security Council	02/03/87
4.	8	SVR 4/87	1	Security State Council	16/03/87
5.	8	SVR 5/87	1	State Security Council	30/03/87
6.	8	SVR 6/87	1	State Security Council	13/04/87
7.	8	SVR 7/87	1	Security State Council	27/04/87
8.	8	SVR /8/87	1	State Security Council	13/05/87
9.	8	SVR 9/87	1	State Security Council	25/05/87
10.	8	SVR 10/87	1	Security State Council	08/06/87



11.	8	SVR 11/87	1	State Security Council	22/06/87
12.	8	SVR 12/87	1	State Security Council	27/07/87
13.	8	SVR 13/87	1	Security State Council	10/08/87
14.	8	SVR 14/87	1	State Security Council	24/08/87
15.	8	SVR 15/87	1	State Security Council	07/09/87
16.	8	SVR 16/87	1	Security State Council	21/09/87
17.	8	SVR 17/87	1	State Security Council	05/10/87
18.	8	SVR 18/87	1	State Security Council	19/10/87
19.	8	SVR 19/87	1	State Security Council	02/11/87
20.	8	SVR 20/87	1	State Security Council	16/11/87
21.	8	SVR 21/87	1	State Security Council	30/11/87
22.	8	SVR 21/87	1	State Security Council	20/12/87
23.	8	SVR 1/88	1	State Security Council	18/01/88
24.	8	SVR 2/88	1	State Security Council	01/02/88
25.	8	SVR 3/88	1	Security State Council	15/02/88
26.	8	SVR 4/88	1	State Security Council	29/02/88

	<i>Box No.</i>	<i>SADF File ref</i>	<i>Vol.</i>	<i>Subject</i>	<i>Period (mm/dd/yy)</i>
<i>No.</i>					
27.	8	SVR 5/88	1	State Security Council	14/04/88
28.	8	SVR 6/88	1	Security State Council	28/03/88
29.	8	SVR 7/88	1	State Security Council	11/04/88
30.	8	SVR 8/88	1	State Security Council	25/04/88
31.	8	SVR 9/88	1	State Security Council	10/05/88
32.	9	SVR 10/88	1	State Security Council	23/05/88
33.	9	SVR 11/88	1	Security State Council	06/06/88
34.	9	SVR 12/88	1	State Security Council	20/06/88
35.	9	SVR 13/88	1	State Security Council	25/07/88



36.	9	SVR 14/88	1	State Security Council	08/08/88
37.	9	SVR 15/88	1	State Security Council	22/08/88
38.	9	SVR 16/88	1	Security State Council	19/09/88
39.	9	SVR 17/88	1	State Security Council	17/10/88
40.	9	SVR 18/88	1	State Security Council	31/10/88
41.	9	SVR 19/88	1	State Security Council	14/11/88
42.	9	SVR 20/88	1	State Security Council	28/11/88

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