

Review of books: Angola - Apartheid's Last Stand

Saturday 19 March 2016, by [HARDING Jeremy](#) (Date first published: 17 March 2016).

***Magnificent and Beggar Land: Angola since the Civil War* by Ricardo Soares de Oliveira Hurst, 291 pp, £25.00, March 2015, ISBN 978 1 84904 284 0**

***Short History of Modern Angola* by David Birmingham Hurst, 256 pp, £17.99, December 2015, ISBN 978 1 84904 519 3**

***Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria and the Struggle for Southern Africa* by Piero Gleijeses. North Carolina, 655 pp, £27.95, February, ISBN 978 1 4696 0968 3**

***General Theory of Oblivion* by José Eduardo Agualusa, translated by Daniel Hahn Harvill, 245 pp, £14.99, June 2015, ISBN 978 1 84655 847 4**

***In the Name of the People: Angola's Forgotten Massacre* by Lara Pawson I.B. Tauris, 271 pp, £20.00, April 2014, ISBN 978 1 78076 905 9**

***Cuito Cuanavale: Frontline Accounts by Soviet Soldiers* by G. Shubin, I. Zhdarkin et al, translated by Tamara Reilly Jacana, 222 pp, £12.95, May 2014, ISBN 978 1 4314 0963 1**

'Angola is no longer a colonial fiction,' Ricardo Soares de Oliveira writes in *Magnificent and Beggar Land*, even though it was a ruined, inchoate slab of territory during the last years of Portuguese rule and then for decades after independence. 'There now is,' he goes on, 'fifty years and one million dead later, an Angola where everyone is pulled into a single political society.' Forty of those years were spent at war, but today Angola is a model of fast-track 21st-century African development, with GDP growth rates comparable to India's, at least until the recent fall in oil prices. The ruling Marxist party, the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA), embedded its style of postcolonial governance by resisting its enemies at home and abroad, and distributing largesse to loyal members of the movement. Its Marxism-Leninism is a thing of the past, after an abrupt about-turn in 1990, as Soares de Oliveira, an associate professor in African politics at Oxford, explains: 'Off went the poorly cut uniform and in came Savile Row suits.'

But party and state have remained inextricably bound together; and both perform the will of the president, José Eduardo dos Santos, who assumed office in an age of strongmen, between Margaret Thatcher's first election victory in 1979 and Robert Mugabe's in 1980. Thirty-six years later Dos Santos is still in power. Under his supervision, Angola is not just a development star, but a model of elite self-enrichment and wealth disparity. There are now said to be seven thousand millionaires while four million people in the capital survive on \$2 a day. Poverty is even more pronounced in rural areas. About eight million Angolans, or 37 per cent of the population, are living on the edge.

The key to social injustice in Angola is a repressive government, ostentatiously decked out in fossil fuel receipts. Western oil companies remained in the country throughout the years of conflict, and beyond. But a dispute 15 years ago with Western lenders over where the government's oil receipts were going left the door open to the Chinese, and in 2004 trade figures with China began to show a decisive upturn. Today China is Angola's major trading partner, rolling out a national infrastructure (including railways and quick-build housing) in return for fuel. The 'Angola model', Soares de Oliveira explains, is simply a 'resources for infrastructure deal ... oil cargoes in exchange for Chinese credit lines to help finance reconstruction'. It looks enviable, not just to Western investors who feel the IMF's fastidiousness gave China an unfair advantage, but to African countries without the same resources. An oil-endowed country on the Atlantic coast that survived the ravages of slavery, settler colonialism, armed liberation, socialism and Cold War military intervention is now forging ahead as a triumphant capitalist economy, enriching powerful Angolans and enhancing the country's continental prestige. The president's daughter, Isabel dos Santos, is worth around \$3 billion and said by Forbes to be 'Africa's richest woman'.

The anti-colonial struggle ended in the mid-1970s, but was followed by 13 years of internationalised conflict – one of the most ruthless episodes of the Cold War, as decisive in its way as Vietnam or Afghanistan – involving the US, South Africa, Cuba and the Soviet Union. After an election in the early 1990s, the rebel leader Jonas Savimbi rejected the result and the country was plunged into another ten years of fighting. Peace came when Savimbi was killed in 2002, since when the postwar poor – and the elites – have found extremes of inequality far easier to live with than foreign invaders, marauding soldiery, ordnance, press-gangs and starvation, all of which they and their children's children still associate with a decolonisation disaster that had no equal in sub-Saharan Africa. 'Liberation' and its consequences were thoroughly confusing to those who lived through them as well as to outsiders trying to make sense of the country.

* * *

The immediate difficulty was rivalry among the liberation movements. The MPLA – which drew support from the capital, Luanda, and a belt of country running east to the Zambian border – was at loggerheads with the Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola (FNLA), whose base lay further north, among the Bakongo, an ethnic group on either side of Angola's border with Zaire. The MPLA was an orthodox Marxist-Leninist movement, under Soviet patronage, with an ideology that claimed to do away with racial differences: the fact remained, however, that a disproportionate number of its senior cadres were mixed race intellectuals. The FNLA clung to its Bakongo roots, which assured it a family welcome in Zaire: its leader, Holden Roberto, grew up in the Belgian Congo and married into the clan of the president, Mobutu Sese Seko. In the 1940s large numbers of Ovimbundu migrants from southern and central Angola had been brought north to work on coffee plantations, and a handful threw in their lot with the FNLA. But the ethnic strains, which David Birmingham describes very well in his new history of Angola, were too great for this arrangement to last: in 1966 Jonas Savimbi, an ambitious and volatile character, left the FNLA to embark on a venture of his own, Unita (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola), a small Ovimbundu insurgency which later grew into the MPLA's only serious domestic adversary. Savimbi, himself a member of the Ovimbundu, would draw his support mostly from his own people to the south.

The end of Portuguese rule was hastened by a left-wing officers' coup in Lisbon in 1974. Piero Gleijeses's story in *Visions of Freedom* begins shortly afterwards, with the MPLA fighting off the FNLA and Unita, in a bid to take control of Luanda and proclaim itself the first government of the new country. By now, Cold War sponsors were fully enlisted: Moscow was ready to back the MPLA, which seemed to Washington to be a Gulag brand destined to project Soviet influence across Africa. The FNLA and Unita were freedom-loving anti-Soviets. Money, arms and expertise had been flowing to Roberto's FNLA for several years, not only from Beijing and Washington, but Zaire; Unita, a

marginal force at the time, quickly became a beneficiary of Washington's largesse and the fighting skills of the apartheid regime in South Africa.

In October 1975 the South African Defence Force (SADF) invaded Angola. Pretoria was determined to see off the MPLA before independence, set for the following month. Sooner or later, if the movement ended up in charge of the country, its leader, Agostinho Neto, would offer support - and bases - to other liberation movements in the region: not just the ANC, but the South-West Africa People's Organisation, which had taken up arms in the name of independence for Namibia. The ANC and Swapo were firmly pro-Soviet, and Namibia - also known as South-West Africa - was a key to the titanic struggle that ensued. It had been a German colony until 1915, then a South African mandate, but when the mandate ended in the 1940s, Pretoria dug its heels in, and now ran the territory with great severity amid growing calls for independence. The South Africans were right to think that Neto would allow Swapo's guerrillas to roam freely through a newly independent Angola - something the Portuguese had discouraged - and right, too, that apartheid would soon be hemmed in by hostile forces unless the MPLA was crushed.

South Africa's invasion, launched from Namibia, coincided with pressure to the north from the FNLA, bolstered by more than a thousand Zairean soldiers, a contingent of gung-ho British and American mercenaries, and a detachment of South African artillery. The prospect of the two armies shaking hands in the capital over a defeated MPLA looked more than likely, and the unfolding disaster was watched with an eagle eye in Havana. Fidel Castro took a godfatherly interest in the MPLA; he'd recently posted a handful of military trainers to Angola to advise on a future national army (they'd helped subdue a separatist rebellion in the enclave of Cabinda a few weeks before South Africa's column came rolling up the country). Now nothing short of a full-scale deployment could help Neto hold Luanda. A week before independence was due to be proclaimed Castro authorised an emergency airlift of crack units to Angola; the next few months saw a massive sea-and-air transfer of Cuban regulars and equipment. The Cubans fought Roberto and the FNLA back towards the Zaire border and pushed down to halt the South African advance. Neto and his movement were duly installed in Luanda on 11 November 1975. The FNLA were still pounding the outskirts of the city and Cuban artillery could be heard to the south as independence was declared and, in David Birmingham's words, 'Portugal's last governor-general sailed away declaring that "sovereignty" had been transferred to "the people of Angola".'

Gerald Ford and Henry Kissinger, secretary of state and national security adviser at the time, had encouraged Pretoria's initiative in private, but when Cuba's arrival on the scene created a flurry of media interest there was widespread condemnation of South Africa's invasion. The US denied any collusion and joined the chorus of disapproval, while the SADF retired from Angola with few casualties and no laurels. South Africa blamed the perfidious Americans, but the real setback had been delivered by Castro's expeditionary force. By 1976 there were 36,000 Cubans in the country ready to go another round with any foreign army if necessary. Kissinger and Ford reserved their real fury for Havana. From now on no senior US figure would admit that a Cuban fighting force had deployed to defend a postcolonial government-in-waiting: for the next 13 years, as far as policy statements in Washington were concerned, Cuba was the paramount regional aggressor, working on Moscow's behalf, and the central obstacle to Namibian independence. Apartheid counted for nothing, and South Africa's illegal administration in Namibia was a secondary issue.

The intervention was a bold move on Cuba's part. It was inconceivable, Kissinger wrote in his memoirs, that Castro could have behaved 'so provocatively', 'so far from home', without orders from the Soviet Union, but as he admitted, 'evidence now available suggests that the opposite was the case.' The Cubans had acted unilaterally, dragging Angola into a diplomatic maelstrom, upsetting the Russians, running a chill through détente, and nearly wrecking talks on strategic arms limitation (Ford's young, hawkish secretary of defence, Donald Rumsfeld, had successfully called for a freeze

on Salt II). Castro was taking big risks, but as Gleijeses argues, his adventures in Latin America had reached an impasse, while Africa still offered opportunities. Cuba had its anti-imperialist credentials to defend and its involvement on the continent was long-standing. It had sent arms to the Algerians during their anti-colonial war, and treated wounded fighters in Cuba; Che Guevara had made two quixotic forays into central Africa. Another, more successful Cuban team, led by Jorge Risquet (soon to be Castro's point man in Angola), remained in Congo-Brazzaville for two years, much of that time training MPLA guerrillas. Pretoria's invasion, Havana's historic links with Neto's movement, and Castro's growing obsession with apartheid made Angola an inevitable destination for the Cubans.

* * *

With the South Africans gone, there was a brief respite for the new government in Luanda, but it couldn't begin to put its house in order without foreign help. The Cubans were already looking forward to the day when they could pull out, but Neto was adamant that they should stay. Having held the military line, Havana now began providing doctors, teachers and low-level managers to build the rudiments of a public administration. Angola's colonial masters had kept the population in a state of helplessness; poorer Portuguese in this settler colony had done the jobs performed by Africans in other European possessions. Eighty-five per cent of Angolans were illiterate at independence; there was almost nothing in the way of a managerial class. And the Portuguese had left en masse. 'This was not just a matter of engineers or doctors,' an MPLA elder told Soares de Oliveira. 'In 1975 everyone who knew how to turn a screw disappeared overnight ... You must understand, in this place no one knew how to do anything.'

The only obvious asset was oil, and the MPLA were at a loss how to manage it. But in 1976, Soares de Oliveira writes, the Algerians arrived and reconfigured Angola's (efficient) colonial-statist structure into a (no less efficient) Angolan state-corporate entity, Sonangol, based on the Algerian version, Sonatrach, which was set up after the French left the country. As the US and South Africa bolstered Savimbi's rebels and the conflict began to heat up again, Sonangol remained a dependable industry regulator, handing out concessions and collecting revenues: it was insulated from doctrinaire economic policy and the envy of under-resourced ministries that wanted a share of the take, answering only to the president's office (one reason Dos Santos and his family became so wealthy). The president and Sonangol's management could also reassure the big Western oil companies that they had nothing to fear from a Marxist-Leninist regime, or - more to the point - its enemies: absurd as it seemed, the Cubans would end up defending French and US oil installations against sabotage efforts by the rebel factions that Paris and Washington were egging on.

Algeria was not the new government's only petroleum ally. Gulf Oil had pulled out during the fighting, but now the military junta in Nigeria threatened to make things difficult for Gulf in the Niger delta if it didn't reopen its Angola operation. Gulf paid off its outstanding royalties and the MPLA promised in turn to keep business separate from ideology. The Italian company ENI ran a shuttle to Milan, where Sonangol staff were offered technical training. The US consultant Arthur D. Little was hired to show the company's managers around the energy markets and help them draw up contracts. Marc Rich, the controversial trader who founded Glencore - and cut oil deals with Iran at the time of the US hostage crisis - became Sonangol's sales and distribution wizard, running shipments from Angola to its most worrying adversary, South Africa: the MPLA were quick to see the point of doing business with the enemy.

Realists in Luanda recognised that a change of administration in Washington would do them no favours. With the Cubans still on the scene, Jimmy Carter was obliged to fold an ambitious hand even before he'd assumed office. As president in waiting he'd planned to push through Namibian independence, normalise relations with the MPLA - and Cuba, as it happens - and face down apartheid (Carter was a dyed-in-the-wool anti-racist). In the White House, with the new national

security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, at his shoulder, he set all this aside. His administration was as hostile to the MPLA as Ford's had been. Shunned by the new figure in the White House but bolstered by its friends, the MPLA now made good on its offer of support to the Zimbabwe African People's Union – Rhodesia had another four years of minority rule to go – and apartheid's sworn enemies, the ANC and Swapo.

It's easy, years later, to underestimate the importance of Angola's stance on white domination. In 1975, the newly independent regimes in Mozambique and Angola were fêted in South Africa's townships. 'Black South Africans had found it hard to believe that white power could ever be overthrown,' R.W. Johnson writes in *How Long Will South Africa Survive?* 'Now this disbelief vanished overnight.' [1] The 1976 Soweto uprising, a turning point in the South African struggle, was symptomatic of the mood, and after it was put down a steady trickle of South African militants made their way to Angola, where Cuban military instructors put them through their paces. Like the new government in Mozambique, the MPLA was an upstart regime which crossed a line by asserting the rights of non-white majorities in South Africa, Namibia and Rhodesia. The prospect of racial equality was suddenly real to a generation of Africans and the MPLA's regional anti-racist stance was celebrated in Africa long after it dawned on the Angolan leadership that they'd engineered a resource grab by securing the oil (and eventually the country's diamonds).

In the West, too, the anti-apartheid movement welcomed independence. Solidarity with the ANC was extended to the new democratic socialist regimes in Mozambique and Angola: their hand-me-down party structures, their Potemkin village statist economies, their hard-currency stores full of Johnnie Walker and Lithuanian pickles, and their 'modernisation' plans for peasant agriculture were not condemned out of hand by supporters in Europe. Nor was much said about repression. The MPLA moved hard on dissenters, including enthusiastic young leftists whose ideas were thought to be too radical. The Angolan novelist José Eduardo Agualusa has explored this side of Angola's history in *Rainy Season* (1996, translated 2009) and touches on it again in *A General Theory of Oblivion*, where he lists the various classes of detainee in Luanda at the end of the 1970s: 'American and English mercenaries, taken in combat, lived alongside dissident exiles from the ANC who had fallen into misfortune. Young intellectuals from the far left exchanged ideas with old Portuguese Salazarists ... Some of the prisoners had been important leaders in the party.'

The MPLA weren't necessarily hallucinating when they saw adversaries everywhere; but notions of the enemy within were a source of anxiety, and the movement's high-mindedness was matched by its prickly sensitivities. Two splinter groups already existed before it raised the new flag in Luanda, and two top figures, Mário Pinto de Andrade and Viriato da Cruz, both accomplished poets writing in Portuguese, had fallen out with Neto, also an accomplished poet writing in Portuguese. An important guerrilla commander in the field, Daniel Chipenda, also fell out with the intransigent Neto, creating a new split in this fissile movement on the eve of Portugal's handover. After independence Neto and his loyalists were firmly in command of the movement, but mistrust and suspicion were kept alive by a bunker mentality. South Africa had retired for the time being. Nevertheless the new government still had two dangerous adversaries in Zaire: the FNLA, which was licking its wounds, and Unita. Savimbi's movement had begun building its capacity in the south, with help from Pretoria and Washington. Congress had outlawed military aid to any non-government beneficiary in Angola, and so for the next ten years US assistance was 'covert': Unita, trained by South Africa's officer corps, would soon be the sole beneficiary. Confined in the capital, wondering when the next blow would fall, the MPLA turned in on itself yet again.

There was no relief from the tensions of tribe and ethnicity, which had shaped the liberation movements in Angola, as they had elsewhere. But in Angola gradations of skin colour added a dangerous layer of difficulty. Could the MPLA, a movement with mestiço intellectuals in senior positions, represent a majority-black African nation without reproducing the condescension of the

country's former colonial masters and acquiring their privileges? Mixed race citizens were closer by a degree, or three or four, to the former colonial masters. Many had enjoyed the fruits of 'assimilation' – a good education, a route up through the system – denied to people with darker skins. Like the ANC, Neto and his entourage dealt with this large obstacle by proposing 'national' liberation, not 'race liberation'. Race was merely a shadow cast by the unfinished business of class struggle, and under new management the postcolonial nation-state would complete the job.

In practice, however, there was a race hierarchy, and in 1977 identity politics erupted through the crust of the MPLA's Marxism-Leninism, with a failed coup by a dissident faction. It was followed, as Lara Pawson explains in her book of reportage *In the Name of the People*, by a long, under-reported bout of repression, during which the MPLA killed untold numbers of people. We can't tell how many, and neither can Pawson, who is unable to decide whether it was a coup or an uprising, or whether this is even an interesting question. 'Frankly,' she writes, 'I cannot say I have a clue how many people were killed in the response to the uprising. I have no evidence to prove that the figure was nearer 2000, or 25,000, or even 90,000 ... Yet the more I've considered the question of numbers, the less the amount seems to matter.' Confident agnosticism seems to be the method here.

The coup took place on 27 May. Nito Alves, the main golpista, and his fellow conspirator, José 'Zé' Van Dúne, tried to seize control of the MPLA while keeping the president in power. Six days earlier, they'd been expelled from the party in a whirl of recriminations. Alves had been minister of the interior until October 1976, and Van Dúne was a loyal commissar in the army. Whether or not Alves ordered it, the golpistas killed several senior MPLA figures in the fracas, a provocation that hardened the regime's heart. Thanks to Pawson, we know that the Cubans lent a hand in the repression not just at the radio station in Luanda where the drama unfolded – everywhere in Africa the radio station was the voice of the regime – but in the city's slums, where there was support for Alves, and further afield.

Race and privilege lie at the roots of the confrontation. In *A General Theory of Oblivion*, Agualusa hints at disillusion among ex-liberation fighters trying to become a national army: to his mind, this was a military coup not an uprising, inspired by 'black officers who were discontented with the prevalence of whites and mestiços at the highest levels of the armed forces'. Van Dúne was certainly a military figure, but Alves was a more rounded character, a man of the people from the rural areas, black-skinned, distinguished as a liberation fighter, much loved for a style that set him apart from the mestiço leadership, with its rich experience of exile and its European manners. Yet there was also a doctrinal component that reframed the racial tension as an ideological dispute. Alves, a passionate idealist – and for that reason a susceptible figure – had recently returned from Moscow infatuated with his Russian hosts. The little we know suggests that he had abandoned Maoism for an uninflected Soviet-style Marxism-Leninism, which he hoped would set Angola to rights (perhaps ridding the MPLA of its race and class contradictions in the process). Neto and his entourage denounced the coup as evidence of an infantile left-wing disorder, a piece of old Leninist rhetoric, but one that was meant in this instance to avert the country's drift towards Moscow. Neto was as suspicious of his Soviet patrons as they were of him, and Alves, on his return from Moscow, had looked to the MPLA's inner circle like a Russian stooge; it was even rumoured that the Russians had been aware of the coup at the planning stage.

In any case it was a turning point: the horizon darkened and the night – in the words of Agualusa's visionary heroine – began 'swallowing stars'. Neto was an absolutist who demanded total loyalty from his coterie, but debate and disputation had remained lively in the movement as a whole. Now, however, fear and reticence took hold. The MPLA – a movement known for the eloquence of its thinkers and writers – had shed the remains of its intellectual glamour, with a campaign of reprisals against real and imagined enemies at home magnified out of all proportion by the presence of menacing shadows at the edge of the picture: the rebel opposition in the bush, the intransigence of

Washington, the ambivalence of Moscow, and the certainty that South Africa would strike again. The leadership emerged from this brutal interlude as an unselfconscious force, a new and ruthless creature in southern Africa. It was adapting to a hostile environment at supernatural speed and evolving as a rare specimen, able to hold its own in a world of charismatic predators. Its future at the time was unclear, but the MPLA went on to perform a crucial function in the regional ecology: to defend its habitat and bring apartheid's foreign adventures to the point of exhaustion.

Pawson is tough on the MPLA and an older generation of Western journalists, or fellow-travellers, who admired the government and, she feels, ducked the truth of the purge in 1977. Victims of totalitarianism and those with a plausible claim to belong to 'the people' – a broad, available plea – get off with a commendation; former MPLA enthusiasts who grew wiser with age are dismissed with a stinging reprimand. There is no mercy for white Westerners who sided with the MPLA. In an encounter in London with Michael Wolfers, an elderly ex-Times journalist who covered Nigeria during the Biafran war and spent years in Luanda with the MPLA as a Marxist aide-de-camp, she sneers at his fatal offer of foie gras, scoffs at the fact that he was privately educated, and goes a touch too far on his physical defects: he addresses her 'with his tongue resting on the inside of his lower lip, just over his teeth, almost a lisp'. Wolfers died before Pawson's book came out: he was spared her parody of the decadent, hypocritical misfit in cahoots with an evil regime bent on money and mass murder. [2] Other journalists and camp followers who threw in their lot with the MPLA are also taken to task, but Pawson's accusations lack the insight – and gravitas – of 'Tourists of the Revolution', Hans Magnus Enzensberger's great essay on the dangers that beset the fellow-traveller.

Nevertheless, she argues convincingly that the post-Alves purge left thousands of people too afraid to talk about what had happened, or to call the MPLA into question. A short account by a Cuban paediatrician who served in Angola overshadows every other scene in Pawson's drama. Dr Martínez was stationed in Luena, a small town in the east, at the time of the coup. In the late afternoon of 27 May he was summoned to the edge of town. When he got there he found 17 Angolans standing in front of a ditch, including his assistant, Cristina, and the director of the hospital. They were shot by Angolan soldiers and Martínez was then handed the death certificates – details already filled in – for his signature. On each form the cause of death was given as 'road accident'. Five Cuban officials were present at the execution. As he climbed into the car that took him back to the hospital, a bulldozer was piling earth over the dead. Martínez recalled no evidence of sympathy for Alves among the victims he knew: anyone, it seemed, might now be hauled away for execution.

The date of the incident is striking. How, in a vast, semi-governed country, did the regime in Luanda manage to arrange for 17 judicial murders in a remote city within hours of the coup and transmit its list of enemies to the local commissar? If Martínez's memory of the date is correct, the night had swallowed the stars rather earlier, when Van Dúnem and Alves were expelled, and the leadership had already drawn up plans for a round of repression. As with much in Pawson's book, there's no hard and fast answer. But it's clear that in the years that followed, a new level of character-hardening set in, difficult at first to distinguish from exhaustion: the MPLA keeled over as one blow followed another, then rose slowly to its feet, helped up by the Cubans and applauded by the Soviet Union.

* * *

The dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire, which was arming and harbouring Unita and the FNLA, was a more serious threat than Alves. A few weeks before the coup, Neto encouraged a group of Zairois exiled in Angola to march across the border and foment rebellion. The move put an end to any hope of improved relations with Washington: Mobutu was a staunch US ally. Carter enlisted the help of France and together they urged Morocco to send in troops. An expedition, assembled at the double by King Hassan II, drove the rebels from Zaire. Carter committed \$15 million in non-lethal

aid to Mobutu and his human rights platform promptly sank without trace. Washington nonetheless had it on good evidence that Cuba played no part in 'Shaba I'. [3]

The Cubans let Neto know how rash they considered his dispatch of armed exiles to Zaire. But then in May 1978 there was a second foray, Shaba II, by an even larger group, setting off from Angolan soil and entering Zaire via Zambia. Chivvied by Brzezinski, Carter rounded on Cuba and accused it of complicity. The Russians were exasperated too, and the Cubans were caught off-guard: how could Neto have approved an attack on Zaire without thinking through the diplomatic repercussions for his allies? Worse, he had promised it wouldn't happen again. The Ministry of Defence in Havana shot off a cable:

"More than once, we have expressed our concern that the Katangans [the Zairois expatriates] could create problems for the People's Republic of Angola ... We trust in your honesty, Comrade President, and therefore we do not doubt that you are true to your word. But we don't understand how entire battalions, thousands of men based in Angola, could enter Zaire without the approval of some Angolan authorities."

There was more to the flurry of recriminations than a skirmish in Zaire; Castro had recently sent troops to the new Marxist regime in Ethiopia, to combat a secession in the Ogaden, and Cuba's growing footprint in Africa was angering Washington. In the early 1960s Castro could play the anti-imperialist on the continent without alarming the US in the way that his Latin American crusade had done, but Washington now had its eye on Africa. It's not clear whether Neto weighed these questions when he went behind the backs of his patrons, as he sometimes did. 'We did not trust him,' a former KGB officer in Angola recalled. 'He was not a pliant figure in the hands of our apparatchiks.' Shaba II was quickly beaten back by a combined force of French and Belgians, but it achieved the effect that Neto wanted. Cowed by the second threat in less than 14 months, Mobutu agreed to a deal: the Angolans would disarm the exiles, and he would throw out the FNLA. [4] Unita's weapons caches were dispersed and Beijing was informed that it could no longer move arms through Zaire to Savimbi - still a self-proclaimed champion of Maoism. Without Mobutu, the FNLA was finished, but Savimbi had a following - and a future - in the south of Angola: he would now get most of what he needed from the apartheid regime. Towards the end of the year China sent him a generous arms shipment via Namibia.

The South Africans had been happy to let the dust settle after the international stir their invasion caused, but in 1978 they struck again with a raid on a Namibian encampment at Cassinga, in southern Angola, about 150 miles north of the border. The operation began with a series of bombing and strafing runs; an airborne assault by paratroopers followed. Cubans from a nearby military base rushed to the camp and the paras fell back, but the operation was a success: at the end of the day 16 Cubans and 600 Namibians - many of them women and children - were dead. The camp was run by Swapo and undoubtedly contained fighters, but there were also large numbers of refugees: civilians had been moving north across the border as South African repression intensified in Namibia. Cassinga was a rapid-deployment massacre. It signalled that the SADF had recovered its form and the war in Angola was set to intensify.

* * *

As the military story gathers pace, the shifting fortunes of the protagonists are a key part of Gleijeses's survey. At the same time he keeps track of the costive diplomacy and the ideological deadlock that prolonged the conflict, working through scores of interviews with former statesmen, soldiers and mandarins in Pretoria, Havana and Washington. Incisive commentary is pulled from State Department and CIA files, showing the cynicism and deceit that dogged relations between South Africa and the Americans. Soviet memoirs and exchanges between Moscow and Havana, now

in the Cuban archive, show growing strains over military strategy in Angola. Gleijeses has turned up astonishing material in Havana, including minutes of meetings convened by Castro, verbatim memos on Angola – we’ve never seen these before – and debriefings from his centurions in the field.

One of the mysteries until now has been how Cuba funded its presence in Angola, from the mid-1970s until the last contingent of soldiers left in 1991. The Havana archive clears this up. It was said in the day that they were a ‘mercenary’ force, which could access the diamonds, or fleece the MPLA of its oil revenue as the Angolan people starved – and they did – or alternatively that the Russians bankrolled the whole expedition. These assertions were driven mostly by anti-communist ideology. At the same time, when there was no knowing, journalists felt safer if they took the hard-bitten view. In Angola the Cold War was a blindfold for visiting reporters: you could choose which side would tie it but then you had to rely on your own sense of where you were being led and why. In the 1980s I was for the MPLA – the most rebarbative, unco-operative minders and bureaucrats I’ve ever had dealings with, apart from Unita, with whom I was embedded in the centre of the country for a few uneasy days in the 1990s. But the MPLA was locked in a costly struggle with apartheid and for much of the time they got the worst of it.

Whatever their view of the situation, no foreign journalists who set foot in Angola in the 1970s and 1980s had much sense of the balance sheet, which Gleijeses has drawn up from archive sources. Moscow’s price for keeping the MPLA supplied with weapons between 1975 and a pre-election ceasefire in 1991 was \$6 billion, most of it on credit: when the Soviet Union ceased to exist the Russians were \$4 billion out of pocket. In addition Moscow kept the Cuban arsenal topped up. The Cubans were their own quartermasters in Angola, although in the early years Raúl Castro reminded Neto that they were also feeding large numbers of Angolan soldiers and feeling the pinch. Three years in, it was agreed that Cuba would pay the salaries of its own soldiers and the MPLA would take care of the rest: food, billeting and transport to and from Angola. Castro drew down the deployment in the late 1970s, and was always on the lookout for an opportunity to pull out, but as Neto admitted, the chance of a conscript army with a few Russian advisers prevailing in the event of another South African invasion was ‘less than zero’.

When Neto went to Havana in 1979, he got a presidential lecture about the Angolan army, the Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angola (Fapla):

“I tell you in all sincerity that you must intensify your training of Fapla, because, look, Comrade Neto, you pay a price for our presence, and it is also a great sacrifice for us ... The problem is not just economic. We have to ask tens of thousands of our men to leave the country for a year, 18 months, two years. The cost in human terms is enormous ... Therefore I urge you to do everything you can to prepare Fapla, so that one day ... we will be able to withdraw our troops.”

But with Fapla painfully slow to get the measure of its enemies, that day was a long way off. Neto, who had begged the Cubans to stay, died in Moscow, where he was being treated for cancer. A shrewd, tyrannical figure who had estranged the Cubans more than once, and the Russians often, was replaced by an undistinguished apparatchik, trained as a petroleum engineer in Baku, and apparently better disposed to the Russians. José Eduardo dos Santos, however, filled an important requirement of the succession: like his predecessor, he was black; a mixed race president would have laid the MPLA open to even stronger accusations of racial elitism than it was subject to already.

In the meantime thousands of Cuban aid workers and technical assistants had been pouring into the country. Havana had begun by feeding them out of its own budget, bearing the cost of flights and paying their salaries at home. But the aid and technical mission in Angola – a country with 14 doctors and 6.4 million people at the time of independence – was vastly larger than any other Cuban

mission, and the cost of keeping troops in the country was already \$100 million a year. Under pressure, the MPLA agreed to pay the civilian salaries, anything between \$250 and \$1200 a month (a Cuban nurse earned \$630). That was a gain for Havana: something in the order of seven thousand Cubans who would have been on the state payroll at home were now on the MPLA's, but it did nothing to offset Cuba's military expenditure.

According to the civilian aid agreement, half the Cubans' salaries were to be paid in kwanzas, the local, non-convertible currency. The official exchange rates were a joke and besides, there was very little to buy in Angola. Aid salaries paid by the MPLA were trucked to the Cuban Embassy, where great wads of kwanzas must have lined the corridors. Jorge Risquet, who ran the civilian mission in Angola, told Dos Santos: 'We have a lot of kwanzas that we have received for the technical assistance, and we have nowhere to spend them. Our ambassador is a millionaire.' The Cuban cooperantes had no dollars to convert on the black market. Their lifestyle in Angola was lean. One of them remembers living mostly on spam from the Netherlands. Many nevertheless agreed to renew their contracts (perhaps the salaries were higher than they would have been at home – Gleijeses doesn't say). As for the Cuban military, service in Angola was presented as a comrade's choice. But, as Gleijeses explains, officers who turned it down were cashiered. Rank and file who declined ran into a bureaucratic ceiling on their way up through Cuba's party structures. Angola was Castro's last and greatest internationalist adventure and it paid to go along with his vision of a post-apartheid solution on a distant continent.

* * *

With the arrival of the Reagan administration in 1981, pressure on the MPLA – and Cuba – redoubled. Reagan hailed Savimbi as a freedom fighter – 'fire-fighter' comes to mind – and signalled to South Africa that race segregation was a minor sin in a freedom-loving country doing its bit to defeat international communism. Pretoria set aside its worries that the US would betray it again, as it had in 1975: the SADF committed more personnel, intelligence and firepower to Savimbi and his movement, building up his base in southern Angola and accompanying his fighters on their wrecking sprees in the centre of the country, which threw Fapla into disarray, terrorised civilians and destroyed the crumbling remains of the railways, roads and electricity supply. Both sides sowed landmines, but Unita was far more assiduous, on strategic grounds: curtailing local peasant farming was as important as disrupting food distribution – without either, the country would grind to a halt and the population would learn to loathe the MPLA. By the early 1980s there were signs in central Angola that hunger was turning into famine.

Castro had removed thousands of troops, but the drawdown now came to a halt. As Gleijeses explains, he was also mulling over possible threats at home. Scarcely in the saddle, the new US secretary of state, Alexander Haig, had told his adviser Bud McFarlane: 'I want to go after Cuba, Bud ... give me a plan for doing it.' Haig hadn't ruled out an invasion of the island, and neither had Castro: before Carter lost the election, Castro had begun laying plans for a 'war of the entire people': he'd talked 500,000 firearms out of Moscow free of charge for the island's territorial militia and bought many more from the Eastern Bloc and North Korea.

In 1982 Reagan sent General Vernon Walters down to Havana to dictate terms. Walters ate 'a lot of fruit and lobster', according to a Castro aide, and put Washington's cards on what must have been a very cluttered table: no more Cuban support for guerrillas in El Salvador and Colombia, break with the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua and clear out of Angola. The Cubans announced that they were happy to talk further. Reagan was impressed by Walters's debriefing. He wrote in his diary: 'Walters does one h-ll of a job.' And two days later, this luminous entry: 'They are uptight, thinking we may be planning an invasion.'

There would be no American invasion, but Castro remained braced on the home front and engrossed in a war in Africa that he and his protégés showed no sign of winning. Defeat would be humiliating: apartheid victorious, its puppet regime installed in Angola, the ANC and Swapo forced to pack their bags, the Reagan doctrine of total victory over communism roundly endorsed by success in southern Africa, and independence for Namibia deferred or debased as a fig-leaf deal that left apartheid's subalterns intact. Unable to face this prospect Castro redoubled his interest in military affairs. The more personnel, intelligence and firepower South Africa threw behind Unita, the greater his insistence on clear-cut military dispositions.

The goal of the Angolan army, in the Cuban view, was to become an effective counterinsurgency force, swatting off Savimbi's offensives, giving chase and mopping up the remnants. The role of the comrade guests was to stand up to a repeat of the South African invasion in 1975. That meant deploying Cubans in southern Angola to form a line of defence north of the Namibian border. But this division of duties was liable to fray. Fapla's helplessness during the early years forced Cubans into combat against Unita, which was going from strength to strength under South African tutelage. Increasingly South African contingents were out in the field, supporting rebel infiltrations, compromising the clarity the Cubans preferred.

The Soviet Union was another Cuban headache. It had around 11,000 military advisers in Angola – all forbidden to fight – and held firmly to the belief that Fapla should become a conventional army marching this way and that, on well-planned campaigns with long supply lines, plenty of troops and armour, and the potential to go into battle anywhere. From Moscow, the Soviet chiefs of staff envisaged the kind of war in Angola that the Warsaw Pact countries might have to fight in Europe. The Soviet Union's sponsorship of Fapla meant that its opinions weighed heavily with Dos Santos and the Angolan generals, who found the idea of a large national fighting force seductive. Gleijeses heard from a retired senior officer that 'the Cubans ... would tell us: "We will stop a South African invasion, you must focus on the war against the bandits [Unita] ... You don't need a conventional army." ... But we were mesmerised. "Hell no," we said, "we want a strong army, a conventional army."' Over the years Soviet advice and training created a fighting force of about 80,000 to 90,000, with a respectable officer corps and a few dozen good, disciplined brigades, who don't always get the praise they deserve in South African Boy's Own memoirs of the Angolan war. Even so, there were also tens of thousands of unreliable, reluctant soldiers in Fapla's rank and file.

As a last resort the Cubans would argue that they had historic experience as insurgents. 'We haven't always agreed with Comrade Konstantin,' Castro remarked at a meeting in Luanda, where Konstantin Kurochkin, the head of the Soviet military mission, was present. 'He is more the academic type, we are a little more, let's say, "guerrillas".' The Cubans poked fun at the Soviet posture in Angola, arguing that Russian war plans were drawn up for another era and another place. Castro ridiculed a scheme to retake a one-horse town held by Unita as a rerun of the Red Army's 'operation against Berlin'. A few years later he told the Soviet foreign minister Anatoly Adamishin what a bombastic distraction the Soviet effort to train a prestigious African army had been: 'You underestimated the bandits [Unita] and concentrated on creating a big army with many tanks, guns, and artillery ... troops who knew how to parade. It was a great army for parades.' Soviet campaign maps, with lots of wishful arrows scrawled in, were a running joke among the Cuban officers. 'You always criticise us,' Kurochkin replied to his tormentors, 'saying that we draw too many arrows.' Another Cuban refrain, which Gorbachev recalled in his memoirs, was the Soviets' campaign in Afghanistan: if it was anything like the one in Angola, the Cubans suggested, 'it was no wonder that victory eluded them.'

Gleijeses doesn't say so, but Castro underestimated the difficulty of fighting an enemy who could have it both ways. In the centre of the country, Savimbi's fighters could assemble slowly, carry out an operation and then disperse rapidly into the countryside like any effective guerrilla force. But

Unita was also a large, well-equipped organisation, with about sixty thousand combatants, capable of fighting conventional set-piece battles, taking towns and even hanging onto them. For this reason, the government was convinced it had to have an army, with garrisons, a game plan, heavy weapons and some kind of air force. There was no national military infrastructure at independence: it had to be built from scratch. Without the Soviet presence this would not have been achieved, however frustrated the Cubans were by the galumphing campaign strategies and the costs in terms of men and armour. What they really wanted – small, dedicated Fapla contingents that could harry Unita – was probably something only they could have managed. But their mission in Angola, as they saw it, was to fight the racist invader and protect the national integrity of the new postcolonial state. They were loath to engage Angolans, even Savimbi's collaborationist 'bandits'. In any case, as the war dragged on, Savimbi had too much support from South Africa and the US, too sizeable a rear base and too many fighters on the ground for clinical counterinsurgency on its own to be the solution.

Namibia was the ostensible focus of US diplomacy, but the primary objective was to force the Cubans out of Angola and ensure the collapse of the regime. Carter had thrown his weight behind UN Resolution 435, calling for independence, but the proposal had a hole under the waterline: it envisaged South Africa hanging on to part of the territory. [5] The process was bogged down as Swapo continued its ineffectual struggle from Angola and the South Africans pursued an 'internal solution' based on a compliant, neocolonial parliament in Namibia with friendly MPs running the show. The Reagan administration had its own plan, known as 'linkage', thought up by Chester Crocker, the assistant secretary of state for African affairs. He sketched it out to the South Africans shortly after he took office: no independence for Namibia until all foreign troops had left Angolan soil. In conversations with Pretoria, whose military commitment to Savimbi put hundreds of special forces in Angola, this came to mean that Resolution 435 would be stalled until the last Cubans had packed their bags. Crocker must have known that the moment they did so, South African forces would storm through Angola behind their Unita auxiliaries, and proclaim a victory for Savimbi, whereupon Namibian independence – in which Savimbi had no interest – could be postponed indefinitely. Linkage was the lynchpin of Washington's 'constructive engagement' with apartheid, and a blessing in the eyes of Pik Botha, South Africa's foreign minister. 'I believe,' he said in May 1981, reporting back on his meetings with the new administration in Washington, 'that in the entire period since the Second World War, there has never been a US government as well disposed towards us as the present government.'

The policy put the MPLA and the Cubans on the spot by suggesting that the fate of Namibia no longer lay in Washington's hands, and certainly not in Pretoria's; it was up to Luanda and Havana. But, as Gleijeses explains, Crocker's objectives and Pretoria's never fully coincided. Washington's priority was to get the Cubans out of Angola. The South Africans hoped only to stall independence. There was nothing in Crocker's policy to nudge them from their default preference, which was to topple the MPLA and have Savimbi disband Swapo's bases. (It was even argued by some in the SADF that if Swapo was comprehensively smashed, Resolution 435 could be implemented and a neighbourly, pro-apartheid government installed in Namibia.) Seven years after it was mooted, Pik Botha argued, correctly, that linkage – and its stress on the Cuban factor over all others – had given apartheid a 'shield against sanctions'. By then he was defending the last ditch: the divestment and sanctions movement in America had inflicted a defeat on the Reagan administration and a bitter, telegenic struggle was underway in South Africa's townships. The only person who didn't seem to grasp its significance was Reagan.

Namibia had become a torment for the MPLA: they'd signed up as the benefactors of Swapo – and the ANC – with internationalist bravado, and had no doubt come to regret it, but with Reagan in office there was now a fight to the death in southern Africa, and the Cubans were on the ground to ensure there was no faint-heartedness. But Soviet military grandstanding wasn't helping the

internationalist cause. In August 1983 the South Africans and Unita launched an attack on Cangamba, a small outpost in the south-east, pitting 6000 of Savimbi's fighters, with SADF advisers and special forces, against 800 Fapla troops and 100 Cubans. After an Alamo-like resistance, Unita fell back with heavy casualties; in Gleijeses's account, 160 Fapla and 18 Cubans were killed. The dust had barely settled when the row began. Castro cabled Dos Santos: 'We have achieved a great victory ... Now we must be practical.' He called for a withdrawal from Cangamba in short order: if troops remained in place the South Africans would take to the air and avenge the defeat, in a town with 'no anti-aircraft defence' in 'an isolated position 250 km from our lines'. The Russians disagreed: Kurochkin announced that Fapla should take advantage of the enemy's disarray and give pursuit, across a wilderness that was largely under Unita control. (Gleijeses calls Cangamba 'a springboard to nowhere'.)

Castro cabled his generals from Havana:

"You must insist with the Angolans that it would be a grave error to keep a Fapla unit in Cangamba ... that your orders are to withdraw the Cubans, all the Cubans, at once, even if they decide to keep a Fapla unit there ... We are shocked by the words of the head of the Soviet military mission. They reflect a complete lack of realism ... We cannot let more Cubans die, nor can we risk a grievous defeat because of absurd decisions."

Raúl Castro followed up with a 'categorical' order to withdraw. In theory the final word belonged with Dos Santos, who was sitting on his hands as his two allies came to blows, but whichever way he went, the order – Raúl explained to his generals – was 'irrevocable': 'Do not waste one more minute.' Exhausted Fapla troops looked on in dismay as the Cubans pulled out. Two days later, while Fapla prepared for their march into 'nowhere', the South African air force pounded the town and Savimbi was able to claim a victory. It was a disaster in all but one respect: the Africa section of the Central Committee in Moscow now agreed that the Cubans had a point and so, when the eloquent, irrepressible Jorge Risquet went to the Soviet Union to beg for more and better weapons, he was taken seriously.

Five years of military escalation followed, during which the Reagan administration lifted the ban on arms transfers and gave Savimbi \$25 million and the Stinger ground-to-air missile: if it was good enough for our friends the mujahedin in Afghanistan, it was good enough for Unita. The Cubans continued to insist that Moscow should supply Fapla with better fighter-bombers and upgrade its anti-aircraft weapons, in order to equal or perhaps exceed South African air power. A good, prescient joke in southern Africa at the time: 'the fate of apartheid is up in the air.'

* * *

A few months into 1988 I stood at the airstrip in Menongue as MiG-23s took off on a sortie over South African positions. The woodland quivered to a thunderstorm that seemed to erupt from the ground; as the planes gained altitude there was a long concussion in the sky. These terrifying engines of harm taking to the wing produced a strong, partisan sensation that I wouldn't care to examine now. For years Angola had been put to the sword, as Pretoria rode into battle wearing Washington's favours, with superior air power and Savimbi's foot soldiers running before the horse. Here, at last, was a sign that the war was becoming an even contest. Every journalist in the region was talking about the battle of Cuito Cuanavale, a miserable settlement an hour or so to the south of Menongue, as though it were Antietam. [6] An hour or two after the MiGs took off, we were ferried by helicopter to the front, flying low over a column of communist bloc armour as long as an out-of-town tailback in a Hollywood disaster movie. Castro had got what he'd asked for from Moscow.

The drama that unfolded at Cuito Cuanavale is still a source of contention. Angolans, Cubans,

Russians and Namibians claim it as a victory: Mandela said it was 'the turning point for the liberation of our continent ... from the scourge of apartheid'. White South Africans who fought there, and many who didn't, are happier to record it as an honourable stalemate. The truth is that it would never have happened without a disastrous Soviet-inspired Fapla offensive on Savimbi's headquarters in 1987, in which the Cubans refused to take part. The advance was broken by the South Africans on the banks of the Lomba River, near Mavinga. Survivors limped back to Cuito Cuanavale. The settlement, with its crucial forward airstrip, came under siege from Unita battalions, long-range South African artillery and aerial bombardment. Unita forces went around the back of the town and cut the road to Menongue. If Cuito Cuanavale fell, the south-east of Angola would fall with it and in due course half the country would be lost to Unita and South Africa.

Dozens of Russian advisers were dispatched to the front. Castro drafted another 17,000 soldiers, without bothering to consult the Russians. Havana had stolen a march on the Soviet Union. The deployment was announced in November 1987 - with matters at Cuito Cuanavale coming to a head - at a meeting in Moscow between Castro's envoy and Marshal Akhromeyev, head of the Soviet general staff. The envoy read aloud from a long aide-mémoire that explained the Cuban decision to send in more men and armour of its own and argued for state-of-the-art weaponry - the stuff I saw taking off in Menongue - from the Russians. The read-through lasted 45 minutes and Akhromeyev interrupted only once. 'When do you plan to send the first ships from Cuba?' 'The first group is now on the high seas, heading towards Angola,' the envoy replied. 'The others are loading at the docks as we speak.' Akhromeyev - who had been taking notes - 'pressed down hard on the pencil and broke the point'. The first job for the air and anti-aircraft upgrades, when they arrived in early 1988, was to protect Cuito Cuanavale.

The South Africans, too, were heavily committed: besides their special forces, there were several mechanised infantry units, scores of regular conscripts and a contingent of Namibian territorials, reassigned from repressive duties at home: about 5000 men in all. The guns thundered, there were thousands of casualties and there was everything to play for. As the battle wore on, the Russians were stunned by the collapse of the big offensive on Mavinga. A Russian interpreter remembers the despair of a Soviet district commander when he was told that the 47th Brigade, the Russians' pride and joy, 'no longer existed'. His story is one of a dozen or so in Cuito Cuanavale: Frontline Accounts by Soviet Soldiers, a riveting collection of memories and diary entries by advisers and translators who accompanied the failed expedition against Savimbi's headquarters and fell back to Cuito Cuanavale. Under constant pressure, often hungry, the Russians were jocular, arrogant, and always dismissive of the Angolan rank and file, though there is warm praise for a handful of Fapla's officers and accolades for the Cubans. 'The bravest, most marvellous and open people!' says a wide-eyed young artillery teacher who'd survived the retreat a few months earlier, and then the siege.

Showdowns under fire between the internationals and demoralised Fapla regulars were common, a Soviet translator recalls:

"I myself saw a Cuban give an order to an Angolan officer, to send out a reconnaissance party the next day ... When the Cuban officer arrived and found his order had not been carried out, he struck the face of the Angolan officer and said: 'You did nothing, so you're finished - I'm going to shoot you.' The Angolan finally grasped the situation and within five minutes everything began to be set in motion. Well, of course, there was no execution."

Not so sensitive to racial descriptions himself, he's aware of the racist language around him. 'Among the Cubans, there were very many blacks. It was interesting to hear what they called the black Angolans: "Hey you, you black pig!" - the Cuban himself was as black as a boot.' All the while the sticks and stones of white minority rule - 155 mm artillery, range about 40 km - rained down on Cuito Cuanavale.

The South Africans came close to capturing the settlement, but crucially they lost the tempo and, thanks to Gleijeses, we now have a rough idea why. When Fapla was turned back from the Lomba River with such ease, the SADF's original notion – to hold up the enemy offensive – gave way to something more ambitious. Chris Thirion of South African Military Intelligence explained to Gleijeses twenty years later: 'Our plans changed when everything went so well. It was decided, halfway through the battle, "Let's take Cuito."'" In September P.W. Botha was flown up to southern Angola to congratulate his men and, in the words of an SADF major who remembered the occasion, he gave the go-ahead for 'the total destruction of the enemy forces north of the Lomba and the advance to and possible capture of Cuito Cuanavale itself'.

The scale of this new objective called for more resources. The SADF took note and refrained from immediate pursuit of the retreating Fapla brigades: better, certainly, to comply with the president's big vision, hang fire and wait for reinforcements, which would allow it to finish the job with a flourish and carve a flank out of Angolan territory, where Savimbi could announce partition and a rival state. But delay had a fatal, unforeseen flaw: it allowed the remains of capable Fapla battalions to withdraw to Cuito Cuanavale and reassemble. Within days, 1500 Cubans had joined them to reorganise the defences, as other Fapla units arrived from the north. In the time it took for the South Africans to bring up their own reinforcements, the airstrip at Cuito Cuanavale had been repaired and the town resupplied. The new draft of Cubans were already deploying.

Why did the Russians give in to Cuban badgering and supply the new technology? In Gleijeses's view they had no choice. The Cubans were no longer consulting Moscow, they were informing it. In this perilous endgame it was clear that Castro intended to push on, with or without the weapons he'd asked for, provided Cuito Cuanavale could be secured. With the siege underway he planned a risky initiative of his own: not in the south-east, where the fighting was furious and the grandiose, Soviet-inspired campaigns had failed, but miles off to the west, well below the Cuban line, where he could circumvent Unita by running experienced soldiers and good weaponry – state-of-the-art, if he could get his way with the Russians – hard along the Namibian border and come face to face with his enemy of choice: South Africa.

Significantly, Moscow denied him one item on his wish list: long-range fuel tanks for the MiG-23s. With these he would have been able to carry out airstrikes inside Namibia, producing an incandescent response from Washington. But the rest was forthcoming; had the Russians failed to supply it there would have been a decisive rift between Moscow and a 'valuable, if difficult ally'; the Cubans would have been at the mercy of enemy air power (Risquet, one of the great figures in Gleijeses's account, had driven home the argument about air power in Moscow), and heavy losses could have been expected. The 'internationalist' blood and treasure already poured into Angola outweighed any argument for going back; the Russians sighed and fell in behind their unpredictable comrades.

* * *

The historiography of Cuito Cuanavale consists mostly of South African monographs by armchair military buffs, oddballs who dress in camouflage at breakfast, and redoubtable former SADF personnel who served in Angola. Nowhere in this profusion of self-regard is it said that Cuito Cuanavale became a serious military objective for the SADF – for apartheid tout court. That would be to admit defeat. The SADF's aim, in these accounts, was modest: drive Fapla and the Cubans back across the Cuito, a little river adjacent to the settlement, where they'd established a forward position, and allow Unita to return to its destructive roaming in the area. Gleijeses believes this is a drastic piece of revisionism. P.W. Botha's remarks to his troops in Angola and the interview with Thirion are reason enough for doubt, but there's also a memo from Jannie Geldenhuys, chief of the SADF, to Kat Liebenberg, the head of the army, in November 1987, which couldn't be more explicit:

'The enemy's morale is now very low. We should exploit this to the utmost ... in order to capture Cuito Cuanavale without having to fight.' Once the town had fallen, Geldenhuys confidently instructed his generals in December, it should be left 'in the hands of Unita'. But South Africa delayed a beat too long before the last push.

By the beginning of 1988, as the SADF moved up its reinforcements and the siege intensified, the Cubans were remaking the architecture of the war above the skyline: their pilots were flying the new MiGs. According to the SADF and others, their strikes were unimpressive, but their presence – and the sophisticated mobile anti-aircraft systems now at Cuba's disposal – forced the South African air force to play a very cautious game. On the ground, in March, SADF armour ran into a minefield as it advanced on Cuito Cuanavale. Three or four tanks were lost, maybe more – this, too, is disputed – and the South Africans withdrew in disarray. Abandoning expensive armour short of the objective was a symbolic blow for a military culture founded on white supremacist values and thrifty housekeeping, no matter how many Fapla the SADF had killed, how much Soviet matériel lay strewn in the bush, or how many black South African protesters were being detained at home.

News of the setback spread quickly through the region, where it was spun as a rout. In South Africa it was greeted with the kind of exuberance R.W. Johnson describes at the time of independence in Mozambique and Angola, two million lives and 13 years earlier. The canny, unbeatable white man and Savimbi, his unscrupulous bearer, were on the back foot and the comrades in South Africa's townships rejoiced. Castro too was gloating: South Africa, he told Adamishin in Havana, had 'been banging on the doors of Cuito Cuanavale for four months. Why has the army of the superior race been unable to take Cuito, which is defended by blacks and mulattoes from Angola and the Caribbean?'

The bridge across the little river was destroyed by South African artillery. Makeshift pontoons were put up, shelled and replaced, but the Cubans and Angolans maintained a presence on the forward bank. The defences held, the road to Menongue was secured, and South Africa's offensive ground to an inauspicious halt. As Pretoria prepared to rewrite the history of a missed opportunity, Castro put his cherished plan into action and began deploying his new draft of Cubans, plus anti-aircraft systems, close to the Namibian border. The balance of power in the air had changed and the Cuban threat on the ground was worrying enough for the press in South Africa to ask whether their boys in Angola could get home without a costly confrontation. It's now rather harder, thanks to Gleijeses, to read the end of the war as a stalemate. Twenty years later, Jan Breytenbach, the commander of the SADF's 32 Battalion (and brother of the poet Breyten), told him: 'Bloody Fidel Castro outwitted South Africa's generals. It became dangerous.' Danger was a new and bewildering consideration for the SADF, an army that hadn't had to put its best foot forward since Jan Smuts declared war on the Axis half a century earlier.

* * *

Negotiations between the US, South Africa, Angola and Cuba were already underway in 1988, but it took a clash on the Namibian border to bring the talks to fruition. In June, SADF tanks attacked a Cuban patrol hard on the frontier and South African artillery bombarded along the new Cuban front. The Cubans retaliated with an air strike against South African positions in Angola. Apartheid forces, anticipating an incursion into Namibia, blew up a bridge on the Cunene River.

Four weeks later, at a meeting of defence officials from Washington, Luanda, Havana and Pretoria in Cape Verde, Geldenhuys was offered a choice: he could have it out with the Cubans on the battlefield or acquiesce to the enemy's terms: no ceasefire until the SADF left Angola. Geldenhuys consulted with Pretoria and, in Gleijeses's account, folded the following day. South Africa agreed to pull out all its forces by September. With Cuban pilots patrolling the skies it was as good as its word.

Chester Crocker suddenly looked like a credible figure. Castro's derring-do salvaged Crocker's reputation as the imperial intellectual who'd come up with the notion of linkage, underpinned by 'constructive engagement': an open invitation to Pretoria to continue with repression at home and wreak havoc on its neighbours. The design flaw of constructive engagement, as Crocker came to see when his allies failed to toe the line, was to have ruled out sanctions and, a priori, any leverage with Pretoria. But now, with Cubans on the Namibian border, the disincentive that Washington had failed to provide was finally in place. Crocker took the credit, as war aversion built up inside South Africa. How many white reservists was the campaign in Angola really worth? And what sense would it make, as Geldenhuys observed, for Pretoria to engage a well-equipped enemy if this meant that 'no conventional forces would be available for action in South Africa,' where township unrest was running high and a groundswell against the Angolan adventure was growing, even among supporters of the National Party? Hundreds of thousands of Angolans had died as a result of the MPLA's arrogant stand against apartheid - a salutary lesson, well administered - but the time had come for apartheid to retrench.

South Africa's withdrawal revived the stalled negotiations. In 1989 Namibian elections gave Swapo a resounding victory and in 1990 Mandela was released. Events moved so rapidly - apparently so inexorably - that it's easy to elide the connection between apartheid's military failure in Angola and its political retreat at home 14 months later ('Mr de Klerk,' the BBC announced, 'has pledged to free Nelson Mandela'). Yet the successful defence of Cuito Cuanavale had bought Castro his ticket to push down towards Namibia and put immense pressure on apartheid's negotiators. The outcome of a long ideological contest that rallied the West behind apartheid against an inexperienced, ruthless group of postcolonial activists, backed by Cuba with the Soviet Union in tow, was determined on the ground.

The pending collapse of the Soviet Union played its part in the regional settlement, but Moscow was still pouring in arms when the Cubans took matters into their own hands, and Mandela never failed to thank them for their role. The outcome in Angola, he said, had 'destroyed the myth of the invincibility of the white oppressor'. But the price was high. Angolans paid for the shortcomings of a war administration that was slow to learn the arts of war and failed entirely to administer; the population lived under a Soviet-style economy in which the only working outposts were vast, flourishing informal markets - Roque Santeiro was the biggest in Luanda (named for a Brazilian TV soap) - and Sonangol, the state oil company, which lubricated the war effort. South Africa made good use of Savimbi and played cleverly on Washington's anxieties, compounding the chaos, repression and heartbreak in a mismanaged country: widespread hunger and disease; dispossession and displacement; provincial towns crowded with landmine victims; hospitals full of ailing civilians but bare of medication; ANC militants jailed in pits by their leaders, Swapo fighters tortured as traitors by their commissars; hundreds of Angolan 'fractionist' dissidents dead or jailed. Apartheid was a creature that fumbling, self-interested democracies in the West were unwilling to slay. Only another kind of monster, with friends in Havana, could point it towards the exit.

* * *

The bleak era of internationalised war and socialism drew to a close in Angola, leaving the national oil company and the president holding most of the cards. In the mid-1990s new offshore deposits were discovered and large amounts of Western credit were forthcoming. By then, however, the regional settlement had failed. A short-lived peace was followed in 1992 by opaque elections that left Savimbi bitterly disappointed, and the MPLA in power. Savimbi returned to the bush. Oil revenues poured from the president's office to his generals and former apparatchiks, empowered to find 'ever more innovative ways' of financing yet another series of campaigns in a country that had hovered briefly on the brink of peace.

Desperate for military closure, the MPLA made diplomatic overtures to Savimbi and later drew many followers away from his movement. But Savimbi himself was intransigent: what he wanted at any price was the presidency. With large swathes of Angola in his hands he was able to circumvent UN sanctions, occupy parts of the diamond areas and fund his army. The agreement that paved the way for elections had committed both sides to disarming. By and large the MPLA had complied, but Savimbi came back from his electoral defeat well organised and bristling. Without its backers the government was at a loss: three years earlier they might have called on the Cubans, but the Cubans had gone, and the Soviet Union no longer existed. The hunt was on for fixers.

Before long Dos Santos and his diplomats found Pierre Falcone, the French billionaire 'consultant', and the Russian-Israeli 'import-export' maverick Arkady Gaydamak, who arranged for a series of unauthorised arms deliveries to the MPLA. The 'Angolagate' deal was powered by the French, whose thirst for oil required that after years of good relations with Savimbi they ingratiate themselves with Dos Santos. It allowed the MPLA to procure large quantities of weapons from the former Eastern Bloc and slowly restore its military profile. There were openings, too, for Israeli investment. From 1976 to the end of the 1980s Israel had been a discreet supporter of the apartheid regime and a friend of Savimbi, but old allegiances rapidly gave way to new opportunities.

Gaydamak was drawn to Angola by its diamonds, and so was the Israeli gem trader Lev Leviev. Catoca Mining - a joint venture with Endiama, Angola's national diamond company - was set up in 1993, around the time Falcone and Gaydamak were readying the first delivery of arms to the MPLA. Savimbi pushed his fighters north after his election defeat and overran some of the diggings, but Unita's generals never managed to disrupt Catoca's mining operation and perhaps knew better than to try. The MPLA's conversion to market democracy, and the end of the Cold War, had changed everything. Former enemies were suddenly biddable, and an assortment of private security companies began entering Angola at the behest of the government, to protect the party's interests - the MPLA had become the MPLA-Workers' Party after the Alves coup - and those of its commercial partners. During the 1970s the country had been plagued by American and British mercenaries working with the FNLA. (In 1976 the MPLA captured 13 mercenaries and executed four.) In the 1990s it was hiring mercenary companies on the government payroll. Their names sound no more or less innocuous than G4 Security: K&P Mineira, Teleservice, Alfa 5; they are still a well-paid, daunting presence in the diamond areas, their profits split between foreign executives and senior Angolan military or police personnel (in a country where many war veterans from the rank and file are not even receiving pensions). K&P Mineira, which patrols for Leviev, was recently caught on video beating two Congolese they'd discovered on a concession worked by Luminas, one of his companies.

The South Africans who served in Angola during apartheid's wars were among those who saw an opening in the final phase of the conflict. Angolan officers who later partnered up in Alfa 5 would not have succeeded in monetising their positions without the help of Executive Outcomes, a mercenary organisation invited in by the MPLA as Savimbi's forces swept through the country. EO was a remarkable service-provider, created in 1989, after South Africa's army had withdrawn: the game was up and soldiers who'd fought in apartheid's 'bush wars' were selling their skills on the open market. (I travelled with them for a short time in Sierra Leone in 1996, where they were hired by the government to neutralise the rebel insurgency. [7]) EO's officers were mostly white South Africans, drawn from 44 Parachute Brigade, several elite reconnaissance brigades, two 'offensive intelligence' units and 32 Battalion, all of whom had fought the MPLA. EO's rank and file included Angolans picked up in the 1970s by the SADF, after Neto and his party - victorious in Luanda - had forced out the FNLA.

As post-apartheid guns for hire, EO had no scruples about turning against Unita. The MPLA, for its part, had even fewer objections to contracting its erstwhile enemies: what it couldn't do for itself it

delegated to foreigners. EO arrived in Angola in 1993 and cleared Unita out of a key oil town on the Congo estuary; it went on to the diamond areas, and helped the government secure its own workings, dislodging Unita from one of the larger sites and ensuring vastly higher profits for the MPLA than anything its enemies could scrape together. By 1994, EO's efforts had turned the tide against Unita, but the war dragged on after the mercenaries had gone. It took another six years to track Savimbi down. In 2002 he was caught in Operation Kissonde – named for a poisonous ant – after a lengthy shoot-out with Fapla troops. It's said that he was buried under a tree near the scene of his death. His last years as a warlord left the country in tatters, with one third of the population displaced and 30 per cent of children dying before the age of five. They also consolidated the MPLA's grip on power, justified its authoritarianism and enabled the lucrative fraternisation between mercenary companies and Fapla's officers, giving them a taste for the business sector, an entrée into private security and, sometimes, a stake in the gems.

Stumbling into the light, with a more or less unified country in their hands, the MPLA could not tell themselves apart from the tenuous institutions that had been sketched out in haste along the way: ministries, a national assembly, electoral procedures, an army and, above all, a national oil regulator – all of which now gave Angola the proper likeness of a state. But 'administration by consent', 'trial by jury' and 'participatory local government', as David Birmingham points out, were features that 'the colonial powers had conspicuously failed to reproduce', and so did the MPLA: in his opinion, it could never have achieved a 'change of political style' after Savimbi's death; it was destined to re-enact the repressive habits of the Portuguese. War and misery fused the ruling party with the young polity that emerged in fits and starts, under a hail of enemy fire, after independence.

'Conventional boundaries between party, state and public administration,' Soares de Oliveira writes, 'are virtually meaningless' in modern-day Angola. He calls the current arrangement a 'party-state': not a 'one-party state', or even a state hollowed out by a party, but an organic combination of the two that took root on Planet Independence after the sudden departure of the Portuguese. The MPLA's 'generational hold' has become a 'given for party officials, who gleefully invoke analogies with Mexico's PRI'. However much Angolans despise their government, they too seem to see the MPLA as part of the scaffolding of state formation – a precarious undertaking, not yet finished and best not tampered with. The last two elections, in 2008 and 2012, far from perfect, produced decisive victories for the MPLA, with Unita, a party transformed since Savimbi's death, taking around 10 per cent of the vote.

* * *

Corruption is a sine qua non of 'reconstruction', as it was of Marxism-Leninism when the country was socialist. In 2014 Transparency International rated Angola 161st out of 177 countries in its Corruption Perceptions Index. But the index deals only with the public sector. In Angola corporate graft is also commonplace, especially in the diamond mining areas near the Congolese border, where the alliance of private security companies and army officers has led to land confiscation, privatised roads and ruined livelihoods, forcing the population – and migrant Congolese – to dig for gems without permission and be punished for doing so. These abuses have been well documented by the Angolan journalist Rafael Marques de Morais in *Blood Diamonds: Corruption and Torture in Angola* (2011). Marques's efforts cost him a six-month suspended prison sentence in Angola as his lawyers responded to a flurry of legal instructions from various parties he named in the book. He cites a case in 2009 in which 45 miners were buried alive when soldiers ripped the props out of their entrance tunnel and walked away.

Land expropriation has become another vector of reconstruction. One of the characters in Agualusa's novel, an ex-mercenary who has spent thirty years as a white assimilado among a group of Kuvale cattle herders in the south, goes out with his adopted clan in search of pasture, only to find

a stretch of fencing barring their path. The herdsmen decide to rip it down and press on. A jeep arrives and an armed man gets out shouting: 'This is private land.' One of the herdsmen throws a spear, which lodges in the ground beside the armed man's boot. He raises his gun and fires. No one is killed but in the night a group of Kuvale return and carry out a raid across the fence, bringing home the cattle they'd abandoned and a kidnapped adolescent. The boy turns out to be the grandson of an army general, the new proprietor of this handsome, gated estate: another day, another fortune struck on the frontier of reconstruction. Birmingham calls the beneficiaries of these acquisitions 'carpet-baggers'; many transfers are sanctioned by the president, Soares de Oliveira explains, allowing him 'to buy off the men in uniform'. Land concession, like access to gems, assures the loyalty of the Angolan military. 'By 2011,' Soares de Oliveira writes, 'the area of arable land distributed to regime cronies exceeded the amount of land controlled by Portuguese settlers in 1975.'

Soares de Oliveira has a real enthusiasm for Angola as it emerges from 'its postwar political hibernation' into a harsh, polarising version of African capitalism. He acknowledges the country's right to lead the field in the media-chic 'Africa rising' narrative – plentiful resources, prodigal inward investment, dynamic barter with the Chinese – but its social disarray and its vast inequality trouble him deeply. He thinks that the best Angolans can hope for, living in the shadow of Ozymandian public-private projects and a glittering oligarchy, is to position themselves in the path of government handouts. Angola replicates 'the distributional clientelism of petro-states' – Saudi Arabia, Venezuela or Iran – 'which provide large, but not overly large, segments of their populations with some disbursements'. He envisages ethnic and race anger, a growing dislike of foreigners, even the emergence of a Chávez lookalike to challenge the postwar order.

The alternative, in Luanda, is a burgeoning criminality in the musseques, which will eventually spill into the capital's redoubts of prosperity. 'Either way, the urban poor will not stay at the margins of Angolan political life,' Soares de Oliveira argues. He is far too sane to wish another major upheaval on a country that has spent more than half its life since independence mired in conflict. Even so, he can't imagine the Angolan poor, or for that matter educated dissidents, getting anywhere without a fight. Nowadays only the brave or the foolhardy go out on the streets to defy the government. Some oppositionists, as Pawson reports, use Alves's image as an icon of protest. In the looking-glass world of Angola, a left-wing martyr slain forty years ago has become an emblem of revolt against a regime wallowing in the dollar-bath of post-communism.

'Let's not wait for heroes,' Agostinho Neto wrote in a poem composed in a Lisbon jail in 1960. 'We must be the heroes.' His rousing exhortation might as well have been uttered as a curse on his country. Angolans sustained immense losses in the fight to end apartheid. It was certainly heroic, but it was ruinous too: most of the dead and damaged were civilians, offered up for sacrifice by the party-state. Today's poor Angolans – probably half the country – are scarcely more prosperous than their grandparents were, but the rich are decidedly richer. Angola's future may look brighter once its old elites have been buried with honour and good riddance.

Jeremy Harding

P.S.

* "Apartheid's Last Stand". London Review of Books. Vol. 38 No. 6 · 17 March 2016. pages 9-20:

* Jeremy Harding is a contributing editor at the LRB.

* You are invited to read this free book review from the London Review of Books. Subscribe now to access every article from every fortnightly issue of the London Review of Books, including the entire LRB archive of over 13,500 essays and reviews.

Footnotes

[1] How Long Will South Africa Survive? will be reviewed in a future issue of the LRB.

[2] R.W. Johnson reviewed Wolfers's and Elizabeth Hodgkin's selection of Thomas Hodgkin's letters from Africa in the LRB of 14 December 2000.

[3] 'Shaba' was the name given by the Mobutu regime to Katanga province, which seceded from the Belgian Congo at independence in 1960 (and surrendered in 1963). Among the Katangans who left for Angola were local gendarmes who had fought for secession at the time. In exile they had gone on to make common cause with the MPLA during its anti-colonial struggle in the 1960s and 1970s, and had come to see themselves as a left-internationalist anti-Mobutu grouping whose duty was to return to Zaire and establish a democratic republic, with copper production at the heart of a central African economy. Katanga was copper-rich: at the time of Congolese independence it was dominated by Belgian mining interests, fighting to keep a foothold in the region. After Lumumba's murder in the province in 1961, 'Katanga' was a name with negative connotations for Africans: shaba means 'copper' in Swahili. The name 'Katanga' was reinstated after Mobutu's regime collapsed in 1997.

[4] He also reduced support for a breakaway movement in the small Angolan coastal exclave of Cabinda, separated from the rest of Angola by Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo). Cabinda was - and remains - the land platform for most of Angola's offshore oil. The Cabinda separatists went into insurgent mode in the run-up to independence, but a handful of Cuban military trainers helped the MPLA to subdue them. The movement remained a thorn in the MPLA's side. Zaire encouraged the separatists in order to destabilise the regime in Luanda and France, too, believed its oil interests were well served by cordial relations with the movement.

[5] The deep-water harbour of Walvis Bay on the Atlantic coast, which could manage more than a million tonnes of shipping a year, hosted a large South African military base. Hanging on to it in an independent Namibia would have enabled South Africa to force the new country into commercial dependency. Had apartheid lasted, an exclave port that could handle oil tankers and other heavy freighters would have raised the cost of monitoring sanctions. Namibian independence in 1990 took place without the accession of Walvis Bay, but it was transferred from South Africa to Namibia in 1994.

[6] Jeremy Harding wrote about Cuito Cuanavale in the LRB of 1 September 1988.

[7] See, available on ESSF (article 37460), [Africa: The Mercenary Business - "the growth of large freelance security forces in Africa is liable to strengthen the ruthless rather than the weak"](#).