

A not so far-away war...

Ian Liebenberg, Jorge Risquet and Vladimir Shubin (eds), *A Far-Away War: Angola, 1975-1989*

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The South African helicopter-borne assault on Ongulumbashe in August 1966, a known South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) base in the north of the then South West Africa, signalled the beginning of the so-called South African "Border War". The conflict lasted for roughly 24 years until 1989. The South African Defence Force (SADF) and the South African Police (SAP) were involved in counterinsurgency operations in South West Africa from the 1960s when SWAPO categorically decided to use force in its quest to gain the independence of Namibia. The SADF, under the auspices of Operation Bombay, also assisted the Portuguese government in Angola during its counterinsurgency campaign against the various nationalist movements within the territory. These were the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). The general security situation in southern Africa changed drastically in 1974 following the overthrow of the Portuguese government during April of that year. Angola gained its independence from Portugal in November 1975, and the MPLA assumed leadership of the country despite an ongoing civil war. The South African government sought to deliver a crushing blow to both SWAPO and the MPLA by intervening in the Angolan civil war.

The SADF conducted a series of cross-border military operations into Angola in support of UNITA until the implementation of UN Resolution 435 in 1989. The independence of Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, and the safe havens and support offered by these countries to South African nationalist movements, furthermore diminished the so-called *cordon sanitaire* in southern Africa. It was against this backdrop that the SADF became increasingly involved in the Cold War in Africa as a proxy of the Western powers – and in particular the United States of America, while Russia and Cuba actively participated in the war in Angola in support of the MPLA government. This created a situation conducive for the South African liberation movements, and in particular, the African National Congress (ANC), and its military wing uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK), to challenge the political rule of the apartheid government aggressively from the relative safety of the southern African "frontline" states. Despite the independence of Namibia in 1990, and the advent of democracy in South Africa in April 1994, the history surrounding the conflicts in southern Africa during the Cold War, and the related independence struggles, are still highly contested. Proverbial "history wars" are still being fought between various academics, soldier-authors, and amateurs from both sides of the conflict.

The 2015 publication of *A Far-Away War: Angola, 1975-1989*, provides a fresh perspective on all these conflicts. The editors, Ian Liebenberg, Jorge Risquet and Vladimir Shubin, offer a compendium of chapters which provide an alternate view to the traditional drum and trumpet histories of the SADF veterans on the Border War. It is commendable to see a former South African conscript, a Cuban revolutionary and the former head of the Africa Section of the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, joining forces to publish a book on the Border War. All three editors were also in one way or another personally involved in the conflict in southern Africa throughout this period.

The aim of the book, according to Liebenberg, is to contribute to the wider understanding of the war in the south of Africa and to the ongoing socio-historical dialogues about this conflict, by providing a different view from that given in the published works of the former South African generals and servicemen. Furthermore, Liebenberg makes it clear that the work is exploratory, and that the various authors of the chapters offer a multitude of new perspectives and voices on the conflict in Angola and Namibia. As such, the book is a consolidated volume of some previous works by Liebenberg and Shubin and is bolstered by academic and popular inputs from South Africans, Germans, Russians, and a Cuban.

Despite its somewhat misleading title, this publication does not only deal with the South African military involvement in Angola between 1975 and 1989 but offers both a regional and international analysis of the events in South Africa and Namibia throughout the period. There are eight key theoretical chapters. In the first chapter, Liebenberg provides a brief outline of the Namibian struggle for independence over the past century. This makes for an interesting read, because it is of paramount importance to understanding the origins of the Border War. In the following chapter, Phil Eidelberg analyses the Angolan War through the lens of a Cold War template, in which he postulates the primary motives behind the foreign participation of both Russia and Cuba in the wars in southern Africa and the Horn of Africa.

Two chapters, one on the militarisation of South African society between 1972 and 1988, and another on national service and resistance to conscription are, in my view, the backbone of the publication. They provide valuable insights on the home-front of the conflict and go some way towards explaining the rampant militarisation of South African society throughout this period. The strength of these chapters is that they are written by former national servicemen in the SADF who had first-hand experience of military service and border duty during the Border War. Incidentally, the authors later joined the various anti-apartheid movements and became active war-resisters involved in the End Conscription Campaign, the National Union of South African Students, the Voëlvry Movement and the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA).

In addition, Liebenberg provides an interesting chapter on the historical relations between South Africa and Russia which stretches from the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) to the liberation struggle of the latter half of the twentieth century. There

are also three fascinating chapters which deal with the Soviet, Cuban and East German involvement in the Border War and the military, political and economic support which these countries offered the MPLA, SWAPO and the ANC. These chapters include references to Russian, Cuban and German archival material on the conflict. As such, the contributions provide a voice from the other side. The book concludes with three chapters of photographs of previously unseen images of the war.

The most obvious gap in the book is the lack of narratives from the MPLA and SWAPO on the Border War. This matter was discussed at some length during the “War for Southern Africa” symposium organised by the Departments of History and Military History of Stellenbosch University. The hallmark of this symposium was indeed the fact that the differing opinions offered by the various speakers throughout the day were acknowledged and respected, and that an academic space was created for a non-political discussion on the war.

The symposium concluded that access to the South African Department of Defence Documentation Centre (DOD Archives) is relatively straightforward, but permission to view documents in the MPLA and SWAPO military archives is diametrically more complicated. One can only assume that any application for access to the MPLA and SWAPO archives will have to follow a political channel fraught with bureaucratic hurdles. However, unless these archives are opened to researchers in the future, the final word on the Border War will never be written, nor will a complete understanding of the conflict be gained. The classified archival material in the DOD Archives can, however, be accessed through recourse to the Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA) of 2002, and it is thus no surprise that archival material from this archive is mainly cited in historical works dealing with the conflict to date. Despite this, it is commendable that some of the authors of this book have gained access to the Cuban, Russian and German archives, which strengthens the source base of the publication.

In general, the book comprises some 200 pages, of which the chapters per se only stretch to about 120 pages. However, a very useful, detailed bibliography compiled by Gert van der Westhuizen, is also provided, listing the myriad of source material available on the Border War. The bibliography includes the books, academic articles, chapters in books, reports, unpublished theses, internet sources, websites, literature, audio-visual sources and art exhibitions that deal with the war.

I highly recommend *A Far-Away War: Angola, 1975-1989* to all those interested in the Border War and the liberation struggle in South Africa, Angola and Namibia. It is a welcome addition to the burgeoning literature on the conflict that raged in southern Africa at the time, because it challenges some preconceived, and often conservative, historical notions. The book should be considered for possible inclusion in study material at university level for courses focusing on aspects of war and society in southern Africa during the Cold War period.

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