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THE SIEGE OF CUITO CUANA VALE

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Introduction

Between October 1987 and June 1988 in the fiercest conventional battles on African soil since Erwin Rommel was defeated at El Amien in World War II (1942) the troops of the South African Defence Forces (SADF) fought pitched tank and artillery battles with the Angolan army (FAPLA) and her Cuban supporters at Cuito Cuanavale. This small base located in Southeastern Angola became important in the military history of Africa for the South African army, supposedly the best equipped army in Africa, was trapped with its tanks and long range howitzers and were held down more than three hundred miles from their bases in Namibia, a territory which was illegally occupied. Failing to go forward to take Cuito Cuanavale with over 9000 soldiers even after announcing to the world that Cuito Cuanavale had fallen, losing their superiority in the air, faced with mutinies from the black troops of the pressed ganged battalions, the President of South Africa had to fly to the war zone inside Angola, when the operational command of the SADF broke down. It had required the personal intervention of the President to settle a dispute inside the State Security Council of South Africa, whether the apartheid society could afford to send any more troops into Angola.

With Cuban reinforcements the Angolans withstood major assaults by the South Africans on January 23, 1988, February 25 and finally on March 23. The South Africans were repulsed with heavy losses and with the Angolan/Cuban forces seizing the initiative the Angolan army for the first time since Operation Protea in 1981 were able to reoccupy the area of Southern Angola adjacent to the Namibian border. So confident were the Angolan/Cuban forces that in the space of less than three months the engineering and construction units were able to build two air strips to consolidate their recapture of the Southern province of Cunene. Trapped by the rainy season, bogged down with their conventional weapons by the African terrain and encircled, the South Africans made one desperate attempt to break the encirclement on June 27, 1988 and was again defeated, with the Angolan pilots demonstrating that they were in control of Angolan airspace. One South African newspaper called the defeat of the South African forces a "crushing humiliation".

These episodes in the war in Southern Angola were followed by diplomatic initiatives since one of the underlying efforts of the South Africans in Angola was to thwart the implementation of the United Nations Resolution on the decolonization of Namibia. After the March 23 reversals at Cuito Cuanavale the South Africans engaged in talks which were to culminate in a "peaceful settlement". For the Angolans who had been fighting continuously since 1961 the war and shuttle diplomacy was not only focussed on the limited question of

the South African invasion of Angola but also on the end to the South African destabilization of the region and the independence of Namibia.¹

Diplomatic initiatives continued and accelerated after the South Africans tried to break out of their encirclement but were defeated at Tchipa on June 27, 1988. Then the principal combatants, South Africa, Angola, Cuba and the United States reached an agreement on a set of fourteen principles to establish the basis for the withdrawal of the South Africans from Angola.

It was only then that the siege ended and the South African forces were able to withdraw in September 1988. Unlike the Vietnamese who held the French forces after Dien Bienphu in 1955 during the negotiations with France, the Angolans and the Cubans negotiated without holding the South African forces.

The Western press in following the negotiations which led to the accords at the United Nations in December 1988 presented the news as a victory of the negotiating skills of the United States Under Secretary of State for African Affairs, Chester Crocker. However, the record of the siege was that the resulting agreement was a major step toward self-determination for the peoples of Southern Africa, because it finally gave the United Nations the mandate to implement the process of elections and independence for Namibia. The independence of Namibia and the removal of the South African forces from Angola and Namibia came not from the negotiating skills of Chester Crocker but from the decisive defeat of the the South African forces at Cuito Cuanavale in Angola.

As in 1975 neither the South Africans nor the Western press accepted the reality of their defeat. But, in fact, the battles of Cuito Cuanavale, the independence of Namibia, the release of Nelson Mandela and the new process of political change in Southern Africa came from the historic turning point of Cuito Cuanavale. In the context of the national liberation process in Africa the connections between the wars in Angola and Social transformation in Cuba had given the West a weapon of cold war politics to oppose the genuine decolonization of Southern Africa. Cuban troops had been invited to Angola by the MPLA government in 1975 and helped to turn back the three pronged advance of the South Africans; Zaireans regulars and mercenaries employed the Central Intelligence Agency of the USA.

Driven back by the combined Cuban and Angolan artillery outside Luanda in November 1975, the South African generals had forgotten one of the classical dictums of conventional war, viz 'Defence is a stronger form of warfare than offense because it is easier to hold ground than to take it. Defence is easier than attack, assuming that both sides have equal means'.² The Angolans were defending their sovereignty, thus they demonstrated that an African state could take on the SADF on terms approaching equality; and defeat the apartheid war machine.

At Cuito Cuanavale the South Africans had been deceived by their own propaganda as their operational objectives were unclear. On the one hand the broadcasts of Radio South Africa said that the South Africans had intervened in Angola to defend UNITA, but the massive preparation which went into

¹ For a discussion of the decolonization process, see, Horace Campbell, "The Decolonization process in Namibia" in I. Msabaha, Ed., *Confrontation and Liberation in Southern Africa*, Westview Press, 1986.

² von Clausewitz, *On War*, Princeton University Press, N.J., 1976, pp 519.

Operation Modular Hooper demonstrated a different political objective, that of setting up a provisional government and capturing the logistics and command center of the Angolans at Menongue. von Clausewitz, in his book *On War*, said,

No one starts a war or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so without being first clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it. The former is its political purpose, the latter its operational objective.

This lack of clarity on the part of the South Africans flowed directly from the contradictions of the politics of apartheid and the military strategies which stemmed from the desire to maintain and perpetuate white domination in Southern Africa when the whole world was mobilized against apartheid and when its black population refused to be lured into acquiescence. During the 1980s the South Africans had come to believe in their military invincibility as their troops made forays into Angola and their forces wrought destabilization and destruction across the region. The fetishism of the weapons system became bound up with the mystique of white supremacy as the sales representatives of Armscor sold the idea that their G-5 and G-6 155mm long range artillery was 'the best gun in any army in the world'.

Background

Throughout the period 1977–1980, the South Africans had built up major bases inside Namibia, turning this territory into the most militarized space on earth.³ The South African military raids into Angola against SWAPO, epitomized by the Kassinga massacres of 1978, took on new meaning after 1981 when the South Africans and the State Department of the USA agreed to:

- a. prevent a SWAPO government from coming to power in Namibia, if not to eliminate SWAPO as a military and political force;
- b. to give legitimacy to UNITA as a credible alternative to the MPLA leadership in Luanda;
- c. to link the independence of Namibia to the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola; and
- d. to weaken politically, economically and socially the Frontline States.⁴

From the 1981 Operation Protea to the 1987 Operation Modular Hooper, Angola was the scene of a conventional war with set piece battles at Xangongo, Cuvelai, Cangamba, Cazombe and Cuito Cuanavale. Other minor battles took place as the Angolan society fell into the orbit of the South African destabilization. The 32nd battalion of the SADF, incorporating elements of UNITA, and often disguising themselves as UNITA units, disrupted the economy and attacked vital economic infrastructure while at all times trying to break and destroy the Peoples Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN).

Unlike Mozambique, or the other states bordering the Republic of South Africa, Angola was not integrated directly into the apartheid economy. South Africa did not have the economic leverage in Angola that it had over other states, hence the SADF had to intervene directly to destabilize Angola. While the war of destabilization in the other Frontline States was conducted on the basis of low intensity warfare,⁵ in Angola it was clear conventional war for UNITA did not have the military or organizational capacity to carry out low intensity warfare.

³ B. Konig, *Namibia, the Ravages of War*, IDAF, London, 1983.

⁴ The summary of the discussions between the South Africans and the Americans are reproduced in *Namibia: The Crisis in United States Policy in Southern Africa*, Transafrica, Washington, 1983.

⁵ During the eighties low intensity conflict took over as the principal form of counterinsurgency. This form of warfare includes a wide variety of politico-military operations, both covert and overt. For an account of this form of warfare with a useful bibliography of US government sources, see, *Low Intensity Warfare: Counterinsurgency, Proinsurgency, and Antiterrorism in the Eighties*, Ed. Michael T. Klare and Peter Kornbluh, Pantheon Books, New York, 1988.

The Angolan society paid a high price for the war, and while the Angolan leadership quantified the cost of the war in monetary terms the real costs to the Angolan countryside can never be quantified. For the Angolan state a high priority was given to military expenditure spending more than 50 per cent of the annual budget on the military. By 1983 the Angolan army and airforce had been reorganized with officers and pilots trained to use the most sophisticated weapons bought from the Soviet Union. In one sense while this expenditure and training forced the Angolans to the conventional form of warfare, it limited its flexibility in meeting the political and ideological challenge of UNITA and to be able to develop popular forms, such as the militia, to counter UNITA's activities in conjunction with external support.

UNITA and South Africa

UNITA survived partly as a result of the fragmentation and the ethnic differentiation of the Angolan society but more importantly because of its integration into the SADF. UNITA claimed to be a guerilla organization but it did not survive as a guerilla army integrated into the resources and material conditions of the Angolan countryside, living as in the words of Mao Tse Tsung, 'like a fish in water'. Instead UNITA was a standing army, armed with conventional offensive weapons, with officers trained in Morocco with transport, communications and logistics provided by the South Africans. For these reasons the military headquarters of Savimbi was close to the South African military bases in Northern Namibia. The organization of UNITA confirmed the conventional character of the Angolan war.

UNITA's claim to control large areas of Angolan territory was as problematic as its guerilla form. In a territory as large and as underpopulated as Angola it was possible for elements of UNITA to move in large areas of the Southeast far from the centers of commerce and other economic activities. Small bands could disrupt the economy and kidnap foreign expatriate workers, acts which became the specialty of UNITA. But UNITA's place as a proxy army was sharpened after the US army sought to move the military HQ of Savimbi and to break the overt dependence of UNITA on South Africa. After 1986 the Pentagon in Washington had begun to provide overt support for Savimbi, but the politics of this new relationship was constrained by the fact that in the US there would be little political support for UNITA as long as it was linked to the South Africans.

UNITA lacked the ideological content which would give it legitimacy among the Angolan people, even among those who had been alienated by the war and the sufferings in the countryside. UNITA's problem lay in a number of areas:

1. its claim to be tribal based,
2. its integration into the structures of apartheid,
3. its links with the Reagan administration serving the interests of those delaying the independence of Namibia,

4. it was the only guerilla organization known to employ fulltime lobbyist in Washington D.C., paying them over US \$600,000 per year, and
5. the revelations in Angola of the covert collaboration with the Portuguese colonial army.⁶

During the encirclement of the South Africans troops on the banks of the Cuito river with their heavy equipment the USA sought to move the HQ of UNITA and to drop military supplies for UNITA from its accumulated supply station at Kamina in Zaire.⁷ This involvement of the USA extended the scope of the war.

The United States' many roles

The United States adopted many postures on the war in Angola, that of a mediator between the South Africans and the Angolans, while providing Stinger Missiles for UNITA to be used against the Angolans. The differing postures were consistent with the real material basis of the links between Angola and the USA and at the same time reflecting the continuities of the policies of the United States in Africa since the USA intervened in the decolonization of the Congo in 1960.⁸

As in Angola the USA found itself equivocal on the question of Namibian independence. Despite its own history of guerilla warfare against Britain for its independence, the USA took the lead in the Contact group to delay the independence of Namibia and the implementation of Resolution 435 of the UN. The war in Angola gave the South Africans the time to build up a new army called the Southwest Africa Territorial force (SWATF). Elements of this force mutinied at Cuito Cuanavale when they found that they were being placed in the front of white conscripts.

In Namibia, as in Angola, the objective conditions of militarism, war, violence, destabilization and destruction forced economic regression and a decrease in other economic activities as thousands were threatened with starvation. Refugees, amputees, broken families and communities forced to leave their homesteads had a tremendous impact on the peoples of the two societies. The hardships of the war plus the resources diverted to the military away from economic reconstruction compounded the fragmentation and social distress in Angola. By 1987 the Angolan political leadership was forced to seek membership of the International Monetary Fund at the same time when other Frontline States such as Tanzania and Zambia were questioning the efficacy of the structural adjustment package of the IMF in Africa. Thus, even though Angola had postponed its programme of economic development to concentrate on the war, the effect of the conventional battles was that while the Angolans were able to

⁶ For a translation of the documents relating to the relationship between Savimbi and the Portuguese see, *Operation Timber; Pages from the Savimbi Dossier*, Ed. William Minter, Africa World Press, New Jersey, 1988

⁷ For a report on the US military exercises in Zaire and the setting up of six new bases to train and equip UNITA see, *New York Times*, May 26, 1988.

⁸ M. Kalb, *The Congo Cables*, McMillan 1982.

confront and repulse the South Africans the more formidable battle of economic transformation was still to come.

This paper analyses one of the most violent phases of the decolonization process in Africa, focussing on how this process led to war. War has always had a profound effect on human societies providing the basis for leaps forward and in some cases regression.⁹ The conditions of war in Southern Africa drew responses from the oppressed majority, from the South Africans and their external supporters, from the Cubans who were committed to defending the sovereignty of Angola and from all the forces that had a stake in the future of Africa.

The conventional weaponry available to both sides made the war significant in the context of the global armaments process and challenged scholarly inquiry into the present process of militarization in Africa on how to grasp the quantitative aspects of arms expenditures, weapons systems and arms transfers in order to demystify the mystique of armaments and to link this to real social processes in Africa.

Angola was the theatre of the long range artillery war and the radar systems of the Angolans was able to blunt the air cover necessary for the SADF who it seems was experimenting with the techniques of Airland battle.¹⁰ The weapons systems imported by the Angolans after 1985 dictated the military tactics of the FAPLA so that the offensive weapons dictated pitched battles such as the battle at Lomba River.¹¹

This analysis traces the military build up of the South Africans in Angola and Namibia, paying close attention to the interconnections between the war on the ground and the jockeying by the South Africans and her supporters to have UNITA in place to delay the independence of Namibia. Throughout all phases the South Africans were implementing their Total Strategy to delay the empowerment of the black majority. Because of the conflict between the political and military objectives of the South Africans it was only possible for them to wage conventional war if there was overt western support and open supplies. Hence its airforce was no match for the Angolans after the initial losses of men and material in November 1987.

Cuito Cuanavale became a turning point in the history of Southern Africa, indeed in the military history of Africa. These episodes of warfare now form a definite part of the history of the twentieth century joining the long struggles of the African peoples to free themselves from 500 years of white overrule.

Towards conventional war in Angola

The conventional war in Angola in the 1980s was part of the global armaments process with the African theatre of militarization concentrated in Southern Africa. The Apartheid War Machine combined all the elements of the western

⁹ In recent times there has been some scholarly attention on the subject of the impact of war on social transformations in Africa. See, for example, *Africa and the Second World War*, Eds., D. Killingray and R. Rathbone McMillan, London 1985.

¹⁰ Airland Battle was the principal offensive tactic of the US army in the 1980s. See, *Military Review*, October 1987.

¹¹ Speech by Fidel Castro at the July 25th rally in 1988, reported in *Granma*, August 7, 1988.

industrial army without the corresponding social and political base in the population for waging conventional war outside its borders.

In the eighties the weapons systems of the industrialized north were tested with disastrous consequences for the poor of the underdeveloped world with the Iran-Iraq war demonstrating the continued destructive effects of conventional war, when the citizens of the West were mobilized against nuclear warfare. Arms flows from the factories of the industrial world helped to sustain permanent armed conflict in many parts of the world with the concentration of Militarism in Africa in the Horn, in Chad and the Western Sahara and in Southern Africa. All these conflicts were tied to both the process of militarization and the unfinished question of decolonization which had been placed on the agenda since World War II.

Southern Africa had been the scene of intense political, ideological and military struggle since this was the area of white settlement in Africa. After the Second World War new social forces had emerged all over the continent of Africa to build on the consciousness of African nationalism to call for African self rule. While on the whole the French and the British organized constitutional decolonization in all settler societies there was the belief that colonialism and white supremacy would prevail over African independence. From the struggles of the FLN in Algeria to the war of the Land and Freedom Army in Kenya, African nationalists developed the techniques of guerilla warfare to challenge colonialism.¹² In Angola and Southern Africa the present struggles were a continuation of the armed guerilla struggles which broke out in Angola in 1961 under the MPLA and in South Africa in the same year under the military wing of the African National Congress, Umkhonto we Sizwe.¹³

The move to guerilla warfare emerged over long periods to combat oppressive conditions and to give expression to the wide demand for political changes. In the search for reference points for the restructuring of society African nationalists were inspired by the successful attempts at armed guerilla struggles in China, Vietnam and Cuba. While the African nationalists studied the works of Mao, Giap and Che Guevara, the staff colleges of the settler societies studied the counterinsurgency techniques of the British in Malaya. Guerilla warfare and its opposite, counterinsurgency war, continued in the region of Southern Africa until the guerilla armies of the Portuguese territories precipitated a political coup in Portugal itself.

The overthrow of Portuguese colonialism in Africa was a turning point in the decolonization process in Africa. It was in Angola where the whole character of the war was to change after the South Africans intervened to prevent the victory of the MPLA in 1975. The MPLA invited the Cubans to stop the CIA-South African attack, and from 1975–1988 there was a major conventional war in Angola as the Angolan society was drawn into the ambit of the cold war.

¹² Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, Grove Press, New York, 1967

¹³ *The African Liberation Reader: Documents of the National Liberation Movements*, Ed. Aquino de Bragança and Immanuel Wallerstein, ZED Press, London, 1982. See, especially Vol. II, "The Road to Armed Struggle".

Angolan economy

Angola, which lay directly north of the illegally occupied territory of Namibia, is a large territory on the Atlantic Ocean, with borders with Zaire and Zambia. The Economist Intelligence Unit in 1986 said of Angola's wealth,

In theory Angola should be one of Africa's richest countries. Few parts of the continent have such a favorable resource endowment. Covering 1.25 mn km (over five times the size of the UK), Angola has an abundance of land, only 4 per cent of which is currently estimated to be under cultivation. Climatic conditions are generally favorable for agriculture and a very wide range of crops can be grown. Besides feeding its own population (currently estimated to number 8.9 mn), Angola could be a large net exporter of agricultural produce, and until the troubles of the last decade, it was the world's fourth largest producer of coffee. It also has large livestock resources in the more arid south, extensive forest areas and, off its southern coast, some of the best fishing waters in Africa.

Angola is best known as an energy rich country. It has large deposits of oil and gas, and oil has been the main export since 1973. In addition, there is vast hydroelectric potential on the country's rivers, which one day could also provide the water for extensive irrigation. Furthermore the subsoil is a treasure ground of minerals, and Angola should eventually revert to its traditional role as one of the world's most valuable sources of diamonds. Before independence in 1975 there was a fast growing light manufacturing sector (roughly on a par with Kenya's at that time) and there had been considerable investments in railways, roads and other infrastructure.¹⁴

This rich potential of Angola was one of the principal causes for the long struggle with the South African and elements from the West attempting to block the full independence of the society.

Transnational capital dominated the petroleum and mining industry while during the last two decades of Portuguese colonialism, Portuguese settlers organized the agricultural plantation system to plant coffee and other agricultural products. Because of the undemocratic nature of politics in Portugal and the poverty in that society force and the threat of force dictated economic relations and free labor relations never developed in Angola. Penal sanctions and forced labor which had been abolished in most colonies by 1940 existed in the Portuguese colonies right up to 1961.

A migratory system of labor reinforced the social disintegration and fragmentation which had become a permanent feature of the society since the period of the Atlantic slave trade. Angola had the distinction of being the first West African society to become involved in the slave trade and it was one of the last territories where slavery was abolished. Luanda became one of the principal slave ports in Africa¹⁵ and more than half the slaves from Angola went to Brazil and Cuba.

Slavery and its destructive effects became embedded in the consciousness of the Angolan peoples as the forms of Portuguese overrule entrenched the divisions and ethnic cleavages within the society. These divisions were to be manifest at all levels of the politics of the anti-colonial resistance and compounded by the social relations developed by the Portuguese settlers. Because Portugal was so poor, Portuguese immigrants performed jobs which in other colonial societies would have been performed by a fledgling working class. The influx

¹⁴ Tony Hodges, *Angola to the 1990's: The Potential for Recovery*, Special Report 1079, Economic Intelligence Unit, Economist Publications, London, 1987.

¹⁵ Walter Rockney, "European Activity and African Reaction", in *Aspects of Central African History*, Ed. T.O. Ranger, Heinemann, London, 1969

of immigrants between 1945 and 1960 meant that the formation of the anti-colonial movement was constrained by the tensions between the Portuguese immigrants, the *mestiços*, and the few educated Africans who were called *assimilados*.

Racial differentiation and regional differentiation were aspects of the class formation in Angola. The unintegrated nature of the colony, the expenditures on fighting the African population and the minimal expenditures on social reproduction made Portuguese colonialism a peculiarly backward type. It was this backwardness plus the activities of the Protestant church institutions which made ethnic identification so important in Angola. The most important missionary societies each specialized in one specific area with its major linguistic and cultural group, and thus was created a division into spheres of interests, coinciding with ethnic differences. However, this ethnic identification was part of the subjective condition of African resistance in the absence of a clearly defined social situation.¹⁶

Angolan political history

The Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) the party which now forms the government in Luanda was the first political group to clearly articulate a coherent anti-colonial strategy. Formed in 1956 the MPLA sought consciously to rise above the politicization of ethnicity though it could not escape the racial tensions which were permanent as long as racism existed. The regional character of the MPLA concentrated as it were in the areas of intense colonial activities around Luanda was reinforced by the clear ethnic identity of the other movements which offered political leadership in the colonial society.

The Union of the Peoples of Angola (UPA) was founded by Holden Roberto and its basis was linked to the historic Kongolese kingdom in Northern Angola. The UPA was perceived by many African leaders in the late fifties as the leading force in the Angolan struggle for it was based on an authentic popular mass anti-colonial sentiment, linked to peasant uprisings in Northern Angola. But this peasant uprising was used and directed toward a Kongo aristocratic nationalism and was also racist, turning against mulattoes and whites.

Holden Roberto became aware of the limits of a national liberation movement based on the claims of pre-colonial aristocracy and after the meeting of the All African Peoples Conference in Accra in 1958 the name of the movement was changed to the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FLNA). This change of name did not change the essential character of the FLNA and during the colonial period its distinguishing feature was to prevent the MPLA from operating from Zaire. Not even the CIA could give life to the FLNA after the coup in Portugal, and when in 1975–76 the Americans sought to place the FLNA in power in Luanda, they had to recruit mercenaries to do the fighting.

UNITA, led by Jonas Savimbi, was a breakaway group from the FLNA. In 1966 Savimbi who had been the foreign minister of the FLNA, formed National

¹⁶ Basil Davidson, *In the Eye of the Storm*, Longmans, London 1972. See, also David Birmingham, "The African Response to Early Portuguese Activities in Angola" in R. Chilcote, *Protest and Resistance in Angola and Brazil*, University of California Press, 1972.

Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and declared that the FLNA was tribalist and dominated by foreign interests.¹⁷ Savimbi claimed the support of the peoples who were of Southeastern Angola who comprise over 33 per cent of the population and who ethnographers call the Ovimbundu. But the Ovimbundu were by no means a cohesive group having suffered disproportionately from the migratory system of labor during colonialism.

The regional and ethnic appeals of both the leaders of the FLNA and UNITA led to the development of a sizeable literature which represented the view that all three liberation movements in Angola were tribally based, i.e., the MPLA among the Mbundu, the FLNA among the Bakongo and UNITA among the Ovimbundu.¹ This view was overtaken by history for by 1980 the FLNA had disappeared as a political force while the Bakongo peoples remained and UNITA survived as an arm of the SADF.

All three liberation movements engaged in limited forms of guerilla warfare during colonialism but there have been many questions since 1975 about the real purposes of both FLNA and UNITA in the war for National Liberation.¹⁹ The struggles for independence and the escalation of the war from a guerilla war to a conventional war has been extensively documented. There are studies which have given the South African/UNITA version of the war,²⁰ the position of the MPLA leading to the request for assistance from Cuba,²¹ the intervention of the CIA and the encouragement given to the South Africans by the US government,²² and the mobilization in Cuba to meet the request of the Angolans.²³ Despite all their differences these studies have underlined the historical importance of this war in the context of the wars in Africa in the past two decades.

¹⁷ For a sympathetic account of this and other episodes in the career of Jonas Savimbi see, Jonas Savimbi: *A Key to Africa*, by Fred Bridgland, Mainstream Publishing Co., Edinburgh, 1986, p 62 *et passim*.

¹⁸ This is also done by John Marcum in his otherwise excellent study on the historical evolution, *The Angolan Revolution* which gives the background of the movements, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1978. The view that the movements were tribally based is reproduced in *Angola, a Country Study*, Irving Kaplan, Ed., Foreign Area Studies, Washington, 1978.

¹⁹ Wamba di Wamba, "Some Aspects of the Historical Background to National Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa: The Case of Angola". *Mimeo*. University of Dar es Salaam, 1988.

²⁰ See, Fred Bridgland, *Savimbi*, and Arthur Jay Klinghoffer, *The Angolan War: A Study in Soviet Policy in the World*, Westview Press, 1980.

²¹ *White Paper on Acts of Aggression by the Racist South African Regime against the Peoples Republic of Angola 1975-1982*, Peoples Republic of Angola, Luanda 1982, and Michael Wolfers and Jane Bergerol, *Angola in the Front Line*, Zed Press, London, 1983.

²² John Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies*, W. W. Norton & Co., New York, 1978.

²³ Gabriel Garcia Marquez, "Operation Carlota" in *New Left Review*, No. 161, pp 123-137.

South Africa against History

What is of special significance for the purposes of this analysis of the siege of Cuito Cuanavale is the fact that the South Africans never accepted their defeat in 1976 as a military defeat. They had blamed their retreat on the cold feet of their allies, but the wider interests of Western Capital at that time had meant that no western government would openly commit troops to fight beside the South Africans. Driven back by the long range artillery of the Cubans and the Angolans, the South Africans spent the next few years acquiring the technology to build the G-5 G-6 155mm which was supposed to be the answer to the 'Stalin organs'. The South Africans were not aware that the forces of history had shifted against the ideas of white supremacy. This shift was underlined by the massive uprisings in Soweto in 1976. It was after these reversals that the South African defence establishment came up with the Defence White Paper on 'Total Strategy'.

Total Strategy, as it was outlined in the Defence White Paper of South Africa in 1977, was less than a coherent military strategy but more an ideological statement around which to mobilize the white population in the aftermath of the 1976 defeat in Angola and the massive popular outpouring by students at Soweto. As an incoherent policy document which claimed that there was a communist onslaught on the Republic of South Africa, the view was that it was better to defend apartheid at the border with Angola rather than at the Orange River, the border between Namibia and South Africa.

In the period 1976-1980 the South Africans began a very heavy military buildup in Namibia which was to transform this territory into one big militarized zone. South African bases were built all along the border with Angola. The objective was to crush SWAPO and to prevent the infiltration of the guerrillas of PLAN from Angola.

In June 1976 SWAPO had opened offices in Luanda, moving its headquarters from Dar es Salaam to Angola. Thousands of youths crossed the Angolan border to avoid conscription into the territorial forces which were being created in Namibia. It was at this time that the South Africans started to resuscitate and re-equip those remnants of UNITA and the FLNA who were unemployed. Those elements of the FLNA who had not retired to Kinshasha were incorporated directly into the SADF, principally in the 32nd battalion. The principal task of this battalion was to engage SWAPO guerrillas, but not knowing this region of Angola the South Africans turned to the former allies of SWAPO, UNITA, to do the job of tracking SWAPO. It was an ironic twist of history that UNITA was to fight with the South Africans against SWAPO for in 1966 when UNITA first started it was SWAPO which gave Savimbi and his guerrillas their first weapons to be used against the Portuguese.

The UN plan for Namibia

UNITA did the intelligence work in the Angolan countryside providing radio contact for the South African Airforce which took occasional forays into Angola to test the defenses of the Angolans. These missions were described as search and destroy missions against SWAPO. In one such foray in 1978 the South Africans massacred hundreds of civilian refugees at Kassinga. Operation Reindeer, as this counterinsurgency mission was called, was to be South Africa's entry into modern semi-conventional war.²⁴ There was an international outcry against this massacre and the United Nations in 1978 passed Resolution 435 of the Security Council soon afterwards, detailing the steps for a United Nations supervised decolonization in Namibia.

Under the UN plan there were to be the following provisions:

1. The release and the return to Namibia of all political prisoners,
2. The return of all Namibian refugees,
3. A cease-fire and the restriction of South African and SWAPO armed forces to bases,
4. Phased withdrawal from Namibia of all but 1,500 South African troops within twelve weeks and prior to the start of the election campaign, with the remaining troops restricted to base,
5. Demobilization of citizen forces, commandos and ethnic forces and the dismantling of their command structures,
6. The peaceful return of SWAPO personnel outside of Namibia through designated entry points to participate in the elections, and
7. A United Nations Transitional Assistance Group (UNTAG) with military and civilian components to ensure the observance of the aforementioned provisions by all parties.²⁵

The importance of elements of UNITA to the South Africans increased after this crucial resolution. Between 1976 and 1978 UNITA had wandered all over Southern Angola trying to escape the forces of FAPLA who were seeking to consolidate the control of the MPLA over the whole territory. Those forces in the Carter administration in Washington who wanted to get around the Clark amendment arranged for UNITA to receive over 600 tons of weapons from China.²⁶ The nature of the weapons, rifles 82mm mortars 70mm canons and 12.7m anti-aircraft guns helped to transform the character of UNITA into a standing army rather than as a guerilla army. Officers were sent to Morocco for

²⁴ This was the view of one writer who obviously had access to the planning of the South Africans for this operation. See, Willem Steenkamp, *Borderstrike: South Africa into Angola*, Butterworths Publishers, Durban, 1983.

²⁵ Reproduced in *Namibia: The Crisis in United States Policy toward Southern Africa*, TransAfrica, Washington, 1983 p. 82

²⁶ The Clark amendment, passed by the US Senate in 1975, had recommended that all covert aid to liberation movements in Angola be terminated. Bridgland in his book related that the arrangement was made by Zbigniew Brezinski who was the National Security Adviser under Carter, pp 274.

training and by 1980 there was a three way relationship between Morocco, UNITA and the SADF.

UNITA's integration into the SADF was deepened as its soldiers depended on the command structure, logistics and communications equipment from the SADF bases in Namibia. This relationship was strengthened after the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980 and the pressures increased for Namibia to be next. At proximity talks in Geneva in the previous year the South Africans and the Angolans had agreed to the establishment of a demilitarized zone on both sides of the Namibian/Angolan border prior to the implementation of Resolution 435. In May–July of 1980 the South Africans invaded Southern Angola and captured Mavinga creating a sphere of military operations for UNITA to act as a buffer against SWAPO.

The original HQ of UNITA was at Cuelei 150km Southwest of Huambo but after the importation of the Chinese weapons and the plans for the demilitarized zone the SADF found Mavinga more strategic both for its proximity to the bases in Namibia and so that foreign journalists could be flown in from Zambia.

During the period 1976–1980 the South Africans were on the defensive militarily and diplomatically. This position was to change significantly at the end of 1980 when the Republican administration came into power in Washington. Under the Reagan/Crocker position of Constructive Engagement with apartheid, Angola was seen in the cold war context and this message was conveyed to the South Africans in a series of confidence building meetings between the Assistant Secretary for African Affairs in the Reagan administration and the Defence and Foreign Ministers of the Republic of South Africa. It was at this time that the war in Angola escalated and the South Africans launched Operation Protea.

South African invasion: Operation Protea

The military build up for Operation Protea in July saw the massing of over 40,000 South African troops on the Angolan/Namibian border. After the confidence building meetings the South Africans were ready for the biggest conventional battle in Africa since 1945. Under the slogan "No red flag over Windhoek" which meant that all would be done to crush the ANC and SWAPO the South Africans were given logistics and intelligence support by the United States. The psychological warfare of the SADF merged with the anti-communist rhetoric of the Reagan administration.

The operational capacity of the SADF to put this anti-communist posture in military terms was severely constrained given that the international climate was not on the side of the South African invasion of Angola whatever the assurances which were given by the Pentagon to the SADF. Yet, though the operational objectives were flawed this did not prevent the South Africans from unleashing tremendous destruction in its conventional war against Angola 1981–1988. Operation Protea translated into 11,000 soldiers, 36 Centurion M-41 tanks, 70 AML-90 armored cars, 200 armored personnel carriers, artillery which included the G-5 155 and 127mm Kentron surface to surface missiles, and about 90 planes and helicopters invaded Southern Angola from Cunene

province on August 23, 1981. The Angolan defence forces were simply not prepared to meet such a massive invasion.

First there was a massive bombing and artillery attack to soften FAPLA positions so the towns of Cahama and Chilemba were flattened. Then three heavily armed motorized infantry columns attacked and occupied Xangongo and Namacumme. When in Ngiva SWAPO and FAPLA forces put up a stronger resistance than expected the South African Air superiority proved decisive for a massive bombing from its bases across the border in Namibia forced 100,000 peasants to leave their homes in this province. From Ngiva,

the South Africans turned its attention to the road leading North to the strategically important town of Lubango. The South African column was stopped by FAPLA about 20 km south of Cahama where another fierce battle ensued. The invaders failed to break through the Angolan lines and later in September began to withdraw their heavy armor and artillery. Another attempt was made to take Cahama later in the month by a force of helicopter borne troops.²⁷

The South African invasion was condemned in the United Nations, but with an American veto and encouragement between September and the end of 1981 the South Africans set about consolidating their position in Southern Angola for a long campaign of conventional war and destabilization. With Cunene and Cuando Cubango under their military control they prevented the civilian population from returning to their homes. Crops and villages were destroyed and livestock was driven to Namibia and to the UNITA camps.

After the main operations of the SADF the objective was to strengthen the position of UNITA calling the regions occupied by the SADF liberated zones of UNITA. While the SADF occupied these two regions and the Angolan army was held down at their defensive line UNITA was able to carry out more attacks against civilian targets and to harass the Benguela railway closing this main transport artery to international traffic. This suited the economic and military objectives of the South African state of forcing transport dependence on routes through South Africa.

This South African occupation gave the SADF shorter supply lines for their control of UNITA. UNITA spread their attacks to the Northern provinces attacking coffee plantations in Uige. One of the principal tactics of UNITA was to kidnap foreign workers in Angola to get publicity. But even in these activities the journalistic reports of Savimbi's supporters who were periodically flown into Angola showed that UNITA did not operate as a guerilla group but depended on the SADF for air cover, transport and communications.

Throughout 1981 and 1982 the war on the ground was related to the diplomatic offensive by the USA to pressure the Frontline States of Southern Africa to make concessions on the UN plan for Namibia. By 1982 the Contact group had modified the UN plan and the new initiatives were related to both the *cordon sanitaire* created in Southern Angola and to give the South Africans time to build up new resources in Namibia to prevent genuine decolonization of that territory. The plan of the Contact group led by Chester Crocker included, a new electoral plan to be supervised by the South Africans under their law, a revision of the strength and composition of the UNTAG, and instead of a twelve

²⁷ Gavin Cawthra, *Brutal Force: The Apartheid War Machine*, International Defence and Aid Fund, London, 1986, p 151.

week period for the withdrawal of the South African troops from Namibia, a seven month period.²⁸

Throughout 1982 the FLS and SWAPO had made a number of concessions to the Contact group thinking that they were negotiating in good faith. One of the concessions was to leave Walvis Bay, the most important deep sea port in Namibia, under South African control. In 1979 at proximity talks in Geneva a proposal had been accepted to create a 50km wide demilitarized zone on both sides of the Angolan Namibian border. This DMZ idea bore little resemblance to the UN plan but by 1982 the South Africans had occupied the 50km stretch inside Angola and was now speaking of a DMZ only in respect to SWAPO forces.

The other principal revision of the Contact group was the question linkage. This meant simply that the independence of Namibia was now linked to the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola. This position was rejected by Angola, the Frontline States and the OAU. Ultimately the close cooperation between the Contact group and the South Africans led to the collapse of this group of five western nations, the USA, France, Britain, the Federal Republic of Germany and Canada. After 1983 Chester Crocker could not get the support of these western states so from 1983–1988 it was the US which was carrying the diplomatic struggle for the South Africans while the war was waged on the ground.

Cangamba: The battle in Moxico

Throughout 1982 and 1983 UNITA moved northwards under South African air cover into the provinces of Bie, Huambo and Benguela. But even in this attempt at destabilization UNITA attacked in a conventional formation and this was clear in the battle in the province of Moxico at Cangamba in August 1983.

UNITA launched an attack with a force of "three brigades of semi-regulars and platoons of special forces" of more than 6,000 soldiers with heavy artillery. Though the FAPLA garrison was outnumbered 2–1 the Angolan army repulsed the UNITA forces but as at Cuito Cuanavale in 1987 UNITA had already announced in a press release that Cangamba had fallen to UNITA forces. The South African airforce then launched a series of bombing raids against the town reducing it to a rubble. UNITA claimed a major military victory and between August and September UNITA and the press were claiming that UNITA controlled more than two thirds of Angolan territory. Scholars at the University of Pretoria Institute of Strategic Studies then gave intellectual support to these claims.²⁹ The SADF planned their military campaigns on the basis of these claims and were brought to reality by the strong presence of FAPLA in all re-

²⁸ During this period this writer was the Secretary for the Liberation Committee at the University of Dar es Salaam. This committee worked closely with the OAU Liberation Committee and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on matters pertaining to the liberation struggle. For my statement on the electoral proposals see, *Sunday News*, Tanzania, April 25, 1982. The South African regime eventually had Angola agree to a seven month period between November 1988 and June 1989 for the withdrawal of SADF troops from Namibia.

²⁹ See, for example, the maps and articles by the Director of the ISSUP in *Strategic Review*, August 1985. M. Hough, "The Angolan Civil war with special reference to the UNITA movement."

gions of Angola. This led to the military reversal for the SADF at Cuvelai when Operation Askari was trapped. This was the prelude to the encirclement on the banks of the Cuito river.

Operation Askari

Operation Askari was launched in the euphoria of the political and military climate created after the American Invasion of Grenada in 1983. In this the period of Constructive engagement the South Africans had extended themselves on all fronts. They had intensified the low intensity war against Mozambique, bringing that society to sign the Nkomati Accord in March 1984, they had supported dissident soldiers in Zimbabwe, they had intensified terror in Namibia with the activities of the terror squad, *Koewet*, they were linked to abortive *coup d'etats* in the Seychelles and Tanzania, had invaded Botswana and Lesotho and disrupted the economy of the region of SADCC.³⁰

Operation Askari was launched with over 10,000 troops of the SADF from bases at Oshakati and Ondangua in Namibia and was supposed to be the big test for the new G-5 and G-6 artillery. Because of the relative ease with which the SADF had invaded Angola during Operation Protea the South African propaganda machine had equated the military superiority of their army with the superiority of the social organization of the South African society over other societies in the region.

To support the long range artillery pieces which were supposed to be deadly accurate up to 40km and capable of firing over a range of 400 km the SADF forces were backed up by waves of Mirage and Impala bombers, armored cars, and APC's. This force penetrated deep into Angola attacking the towns of Caiundo and Cahama. One of the major objective of this operation was to capture Lubango, the operational and military headquarters of the Angolan forces.

This operation succeeding in destroying civilian targets, but in a major battle at Cuvelai the Angolans demonstrated that defensive warfare was more effective than offensive warfare if both sides had the same means. The South Africans lost an unprecedented number of aircraft and lost over 21 white conscripts, in the words of one writer, "a high loss by SADF standards" which drew unfavourable press comment about sons dying on distant battlefields.

The Popular Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola had been created in 1974 and its transformation from a guerilla army to a standing army had been effected during the first war against South Africa 1975-1976. During the period 1976-1980 FAPLA was reorganized around conventional weapons imported from the Soviet Union. The army by 1980 consisted of over 30,000 troops organized into seventeen infantry brigades, two motorized infantry brigades and four anti-aircraft artillery brigades. The army was equipped with T-34, T 54-55, T-62 tanks, armored vehicles, BTR armored personnel carriers, howitzers, rocket launches anti-tank rockets, and anti-aircraft guns. The Airforce was

³⁰ *Destructive Engagement: Southern Africa at War*, Phyllis Johnson and David Martin, Eds., Zimbabwe Publishing House, Harare, 1986.

equipped with armed helicopters, Mig-21, Mig-19, Mig-17, Mig-23 and Su-22.³¹

There were over 50,000 militia forces organized in People's Vigilance Brigades and after 1983 the people's militia were brought under direct military command. The line of the Angolan state was that UNITA were armed bandits. This limited the political and ideological aspect of the effort to isolate UNITA though the terror tactics and the South African support for Savimbi left UNITA with little support in the rural areas. The specific history of the Angolan struggle had meant that there was a tendency to develop military solutions instead of political solutions to the problem of regional differentiation.

The technology available to the Angolan army plus the increased expenditure up to 35 per cent of the budget by 1983, had given the armed forces the capability to fight conventional war. Angolan anti-aircraft defenses were more effective in 1983 than in 1981 and so without air superiority the South Africans faced stiff resistance during Operation Askari. At the decisive battle at Cuvelai from 4-7 January 1984 the South African army had many casualties and without air cover the SADF faced the prospect of being encircled by the Angolans.

As symptomatic of the entire Angolan campaign there was a major discrepancy between the political objectives and the military capabilities of the South Africans. One writer quoting from South African sources said, "Military Intelligence Chief, General van der Westhuizen and Defence Minister Magnus Malan wanted an operation which would go all the way to Luanda, but the SADF chief, General Jannie Geldenhuys and Prime Minister Botha knocked it down as operationally impossible".³² There was a contradiction between the political climate created after the invasion of Grenada and the military realities.

Faced with the prospect of SADF troops surrounded and trapped the South Africans offered to withdraw their forces and with the intercession of the United States Under Secretary for African Affairs, Chester Crocker, the South Africans and the Angolans signed the Lusaka Accord in Zambia in 1984 where the South Africans offered to withdraw from Angola.

The Lusaka Accord

The Lusaka Accord signed in February 1984, provided for the disengagement of the South African forces and for the setting of a Joint Military Commission for the monitoring of the withdrawal of the SADF. Essentially the signing of the Accord was a holding action by the South African state to assess its losses and to make pleas for resupply of its arsenal, especially aircraft.³³ For the Angolans the Lusaka Accord was to be part of a broader initiative which would include the implementation of the United Nations Resolution 435 of 1978.

³¹ The range of equipment available to FAPLA is discussed in extensive detail in Keith Sommerville, *Angola: Politics, Economics and Society*, Francis Pinter, London, 1986.

³² See, Bridgland, chapter on Operation Askari, p 425.

³³ The Spokespersons for the South Africans carried out an intensive campaign for certain western countries to lift their arms embargo. The claims were published in such journals as *Flight International*. This was before the South Africans had developed the Cheetah to replace the Mirages shot down during Operation Askari.

Under the terms of the accord the South Africans were supposed to withdraw from Angolan territory by the end of March 1984. By April it was clear that the South Africans were not withdrawing and whenever they left a particular position they ensured that elements from UNITA occupied that area before they withdrew. Under these conditions it was inevitable that the Joint Monitoring Commission (set up to oversee the South African withdrawal) would break down.

By May 1984 when the South Africans were seeking to enhance their image as peacemakers prior to the visit of the Prime Minister to Western Europe the SADF did withdraw from Ngiva, the provincial capital of Cunene, which it had occupied since 1981. But using the pretext that SWAPO was still active in Angola the SADF remained in Angola carrying out periodic attacks on what was said to be SWAPO targets.

In 1985 the South Africans announced that all their troops had withdrawn from Angola but a few weeks after this announcement the Angolans captured South African commandos attempting to sabotage a major refinery in Cabinda at Malongo. This refinery produced 170,000 barrels of oil per day or 65 per cent of Angola's total output. The team's mission was to plant 16 contact mines on oil storage tanks, pipelines, and firefighting equipment.

Two of the South African commandos were killed in an exchange and one of the leaders, Captain Waynand du Toit, was captured. Others escaped to Zaire where the South Africans had made pre-arrangements. The South African commando team were captured with propaganda leaflets which would have claimed UNITA as the perpetrators of the commando raid. Captain du Toit confirmed that many of the operations for which UNITA claimed responsibility were carried out by the Fourth Reconnaissance Commando Unit of the SADF since 1982.³⁴

The military and political reversals for the South Africans were compounded by the massive internal resistance to apartheid in 1985. The normal police presence in the townships could not suppress the growth of the popular democratic struggle. Over 40,000 troops had to be deployed in the embattled townships which became ungovernable as apartheid was unenforceable. Through the new administrative structure called the Joint Management Committee the tactics of external destabilization which had proved effective in Mozambique were being tested as the state provided the conditions for police supported vigilantes to attack the alternative leadership in the townships. This was what the Western media termed "black on black violence."

Overstretched by its new commitments inside South Africa itself the SADF could not stop the FAPLA drive against UNITA in 1985. In a major battle at Cazombo in Moxico province the MPLA/FAPLA forces struck UNITA and chased them from the region. By the end of July four motorized infantry brigades of the Angolan army were carrying out operations to clear the remnants of UNITA from Moxico and the region of the Benguela railway. UNITA retreated to its supply base at Mavinga and by September the Angolan forces

³⁴ The previous operations of this commando unit had included the destruction of the Giraul bridge in Namibe province of Angola for which UNITA had claimed responsibility at the time. This unit had been involved in the attack on the ANC offices in Maputo in 1983. See, *Destructive Engagement, op. cit.*, p 105.

were advancing on Jamba with the clear objective of removing the UNITA HQ from Angolan soil.

With the prospect of a clear defeat for the UNITA forces the South Africans ignored the Lusaka Accord and invaded with a mechanized unit while the South African Airforce bombed the forward position of FAPLA. The battle between the SADF and FAPLA halted the defeat of UNITA, but the dangers of this new situation meant that the South Africans needed external assistance as they were now clearly overstretched. Two top officials of the South African government flew to Washington on September 24, 1985 to remind the USA of their undertakings in 1981. This journey laid the foundations for the US open support for UNITA, the introduction of Stinger missiles into the Angolan war, the repeal of the Clark Amendment in 1986³⁵ and the escalation of the war leading to Cuito Cuanavale.

The US back as ally of South Africa

The war inside Angola took on new dimensions after the FAPLA drive on Mavinga in 1985. Even before the United States Congress formally approved assistance for UNITA the CIA had begun to ship weapons by way of Israel and South Africa. From a military facility in Zaire at Kamina the CIA through an airline called St. Lucia airways dropped supplies for UNITA. Included in the package of weapons was the sophisticated surface to air Stinger missiles. These missiles belonged to a new generation of portable surface to air missiles, lightweight, shoulder fired and is an air defence artillery missile weapon for low altitude area defence of forward area combat troops. The heat seeking Stinger Missiles have a range of about five miles.³⁶ In essence the assistance to UNITA was a form of assistance for the SADF for UNITA did not have the military or administrative capacity to fully use the weapons supplied by the USA.

The US intervention on the side of UNITA (and in principle on the side of South Africa) emboldened these forces while UNITA had the unique distinction of being the first liberation movement to engage a public relations firm paying over US \$600,000 to promote the image of Jonas Savimbi.

This public relations exercise was taken at a time when popular consciousness was at an all-time high on the question of apartheid. But intelligence agencies of the US government plus the Reagan administration was carrying out their long standing war against communism in Angola while key US transnationals such as Texaco and Chevron (former Gulf) dominated the petroleum industry in Angola. The United States is the number one trading partner of

³⁵ The Clark Amendment had been adopted by Congress in the aftermath of the defeat of South Africa, in 1975-76 in Angola, when it was supported by the US to prevent the MPLA from taking over power in Luanda. The Amendment forbade the US government to use US resources to aid the movements fighting against the MPLA.

³⁶ Some elements in the Washington military establishment questioned the introduction of these weapons in the Angolan war. They claimed it would prolong and widen the war. See, *The International Herald Tribune*, April 3, 1986 and March 16, 1986. In the CIA itself and the State Department Bureau of Intelligence there were those who opposed the introduction of Stinger missiles in the Angolan war. See, *Angola: Intervention or Negotiation*, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Africa of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives, 99th Congress, October 31 to November 12, 1985.

Angola, and the top US banks Chase Manhattan, Citicorp, Bankers Trust and Morgan Guaranty Trust all make profits in an economy where Japanese and European transnationals were struggling to replace US dominance in the petroleum mining industry.

The tremendous potential of the Angolan economy was clear and one of the concerns of the US strategists was the fact that those social forces for the re-composition of capitalism in Angola had been expropriated with the defeat of Portuguese colonialism. Thus the war in Angola was not simply to defeat the MPLA but to weaken the society so that any reconstruction in the context of the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) would be on the basis of dependence on the West.³⁷ This path to dependency was underlined in 1987 when Angola applied to join the IMF.

South Africa was also concerned about the long term economic transformation of Angola and emboldened by the support of the Reagan administration when there was an international campaign for sanctions the SADF intensified its war in Southern Africa. Fearing the diplomatic and political offensives undertaken by the Frontline States to break dependence on South Africa the SADF built up the war in Mozambique with increased supplies to the MNR from Malawi and stepping up the attacks on the Benguela railway in Angola. It was significant that it was in this period that the President of Mozambique, Samora Machel met his death returning from a meeting in October 1986 on ways to strengthen the transport links between the Frontline States. His plane crashed in mysterious circumstances in South African territory.³⁸

During 1987 the South Africans continued their military buildup in Angola given the shift in the American policy and the new supplies being dropped for the South African army. Part of the \$15 million passed by Congress for UNITA went to the South Africans who were paid by UNITA³⁹ leading to Cuito Cuanavale in this period.

³⁷ SADCC: *Prospects for Disengagement and Development in Southern Africa*, Ed. Samir Amin, Derrick Chitala and Ibbo Mandaza, United Nations University and Zed Press, London, 1987.

³⁸ *Samora Why He Died*, Mozambique Information Agency, Maputo, 1986.

³⁹ When in 1988 the Pentagon was trying to detach UNITA from the SADF, there were open recriminations between Savimbi and the South Africans. Savimbi complained about the amount of money he had to pay the South Africans during the battles at Cuito. He complained: "During the recent fighting around Lomba the South Africans bombed and shelled the enemy at a rate of 2-3,000 shells a night and worked out the cost. At the end of the fighting they handed us a bill. It was huge and we had to ask our friends to pay." See, *The Johannesburg Star*, March 15, 1988.

Cuito Cuanavale

Operation Modular was the code name for the 1987 military operations of the South Africans in Angola. The purpose of this operation was to capture the military stronghold of the Angolans at Menongue, to set up a provisional government of UNITA in Angola. This was supposed to boost the image of UNITA in the USA and to give credence to the idea that UNITA had over two thirds of Angola under its control. Cuito Cuanavale was not strategic in a military sense but it became significant in the fact that this was where the Angolans decided to put up their defence against the South Africans. Cuito Cuanavale has a small airbase and during the period of Portuguese colonialism the South Africans had used the airfield for its counterinsurgency operations.

The buildup by the South Africans Namibia in 1987 had created concern in Luanda. Between 1985–1987 there had been over 900 airspace violations and over 40 ground attacks. In the first six months of 1987 there had been 75 air assaults and 33 ground attacks.⁴⁰ The South Africans were in effect testing the radar defenses that the Angolans had built up and had helped to blunt Operation Askari. For their part the South Africans justified these raids on the grounds that they were attempting to prevent fresh infiltration by SWAPO. After 21 years of fighting the SADF had failed in its political objective of destroying the Peoples Liberation Army of Namibia.

For Operation Modular the South African had carried out construction works and the logistics for this operation had been in evidence with the movement of heavy trucks transporting the heavy equipment, tanks and artillery to the Angolan Namibian border. From July to September SADF mirage fighters were flying missions against Angolan positions while road building teams paved the way for the heavy artillery.

Rather than waiting for the South Africans to attack the Angolan forces went on the offensive to drive the UNITA forces from Jamba. The South Africans intervened with 9 battalions of 9,000 troops. Five of the battalions were regular white SADF units, including the 61st, the 91st and 101st. The other four battalions were mixed units of Namibians from the territorial forces. Two of these units mutinied in the heat of the battle saying that they were being used as cannon fodder to defend UNITA.⁴¹

A major battle took place on the Lomba river when the SADF clashed with the forces of FAPLA, both with offensive weapons. After a fierce battle the Angolans retreated to Cuito Cuanavale and the SADF laid siege. The commanders of the SADF had expected to overrun FAPLA in retreat (and for this to be like the surgical strikes carried out by the Israelis in Lebanon) but by the end of

⁴⁰ *The Guardian*, London, January 27, 1988.

⁴¹ *The Guardian*, London, February 19, 1988.

December the South Africans had lost more than 230 soldiers and UNITA over 1,000. The South Africans lost over 41 aircraft, three helicopters and over 31 vehicles.

This was a heavy blow for an army which could not purchase arms on the open market but under the table. With these heavy losses the operational command structure of the Operation Modular broke down. The ideologues wanted to commit more troops and equipment while those who were aware of the effect of the death of young conscripts in Angola on the white population were more cautious. The breakdown of the command structure required the personal intervention of President Botha to travel inside Angola to assess whether the South African society should commit more troops or should continue fighting with the forces already mobilized.

As it turned out the generals had to fight with the 9,000 troops who were on the banks of the Cuito river while the Angolans organized to fight a defensive war. More significantly, when the President of South Africa travelled to the front inside Angola, the Angolans requested the Cubans to assist in defending Cuito Cuanavale. The Angolans were holed up in Cuito Cuanavale while the SADF carried out tremendous shelling. But in this instance the radar defensive line of the Angolans was operational and the South Africans were on the banks of the Cuito river shelling Cuito Cuanavale without air cover.

The Angolan forces had taken the initiative in the battle but had retreated after the initial battle at Lomba river. Fidel Castro had termed this a mistake but the character of the war had been shaped by the way in which the structure of the Angolan army had been built by the weaponry of tanks, heavy artillery, jets and sophisticated radar.

All resources to the war

The Angolan state had invested heavily in this sort of weapon system and had increased its defence expenditure after the introduction of Stinger missiles. Defence and security expenditures had more than doubled in the period 1982–1985 placing a tremendous burden on the war torn economy. By 1985 defence expenditure \$1.5 billion or 37.9 per cent of total government expenditure.⁴² Defence and security expenditure in 1982 was \$502m or 21 per cent of government expenditure, 1983; \$779m or 34.5 per cent, 1984; \$984m or 38.8 per cent; and in 1985 \$1,147 or 37.9 per cent of government expenditure. By 1987 the Angolan state was spending at least 50 per cent of the government expenditure on defence.

The war drained the Angolan society postponing social reconstruction which had been discussed since 1975. After operation Askari in 1983 the Angolans had taken delivery of new Mig–23 fighters and a comprehensive radar network. There were over 75 mobile radar sets of seven different types, based on 23 sites forming the basis of a comprehensive command and control network.⁴³ It was the effectiveness of this radar which gave the Angolans the ability to shoot down the South African planes. Not even with the South Africans

⁴² See, Tony Hodges, *Angola to the 1990s, op. cit.*, p 35.

⁴³ *Jane's Defense Weekly*, March 19, 1988.

experimenting with the Israeli pilotless plane could penetrate the radar defenses of FAPLA.

But the heavy expenditure on sophisticated weapons had also meant that the soldiers of Angola were limited in their flexibility and response to the South Africans. Thus in the siege of Cuito the forces of SWAPO did a lot of fighting and some of the scouting operations. When the SADF could not move forward UNITA had attacked further North at Muhango to open another front. Muhango was captured because the Angolans had placed all their efforts into the confrontation with the South Africans.

The siege of Cuito Cuanavale forced all the militarily organized forces in Angola into battle. SWAPO participated in the battles at Cuito while the ANC guerrillas in Angola clashed with elements of UNITA at Malange and Uige. During 1988 in an exercise called Operation Flintlock 1988 the US army dropped supplies for UNITA in the northern part of Angola hoping to open a new front.

The intensity of the confrontation after October 1987 drew the Cubans who had been strategically deployed along a defensive line at the Benguela railway. The Angolans requested further assistance from the Cubans to defend Cuito Cuanavale. The Cubans calculated that if Cuito Cuanavale fell and the South Africans were able to take Menongue then their own troops would be drawn into the battle. Thus in order to reverse the South African offensive at Cuito the Cubans committed more troops to Angola in December 1987.

The Cubans and Cuito Cuanavale

The Cuban involvement in the Angolan war at Operation Carlota in 1975 had also marked Cuba's own transition in military terms. Cuba's earlier military relations with the national liberation movements in Africa had been in guerilla war.⁴⁴ Che Guevara had actually fought in the Congo and Cuba had long standing relations with the principal liberation movements. The battles with the South Africans in 1975-76 were conventional battles with regular soldiers and between 1975-1988 over 300,000 Cuban soldiers served in Angola.

The Cuban troops had been deployed to guard strategic areas. Despite efforts by the South Africans to draw the Cubans into combat after Operation Protea the Cubans had maintained their defensive posture well away from military contacts with the SADF. One US defence specialist on Southern Africa noted:

The Cuban defensive posture was confirmed during the major South African penetration of August/September 1981, when an official statement of the Cuban press warned that Cuban forces 'would go into action with all forces available if the South Africans approached their defensive positions.' Similarly in July 1982 Fidel Castro declared that if South African troops 'strike deeply into Angola and reach our lines, we will fight with all our might against these

⁴⁴ For an American military study of the relationship between African liberation movements and the Cubans, See, William Durch, *Cuban Military in Africa and the Middle East: From Algeria to Angola*, Center for Naval Analysis, Professional Paper 201, Arlington, Virginia, 1977.

parasite racist mercenaries'. Thus the Cubans did not intend to fight the South Africans in anything short of a full scale South African invasion⁴⁵.

Operation Modular Hooper in 1987 was such an invasion and with the American airlift of supplies at Kamina, the introduction of Stinger missiles and the visit of President Botha to the war zone the Cubans decided that their military position was threatened and despatched crack troops from the 50th mechanized division in Cuba to reinforce the defence of Cuito Cuanavale.

In July 1988 Fidel Castro acknowledged that the Angolans had requested further assistance when they were besieged and Cuba sent its most modern aircraft, tanks and artillery in December 1987. The speech by Castro declared that Cuba's own defence was vulnerable by the deployment of over 15,000 of the most experienced fighters to Angola.

The Cuban airforce reinforced the radar defenses of the small Angolan/Cuban force and blunted the South African attempt to take Cuito Cuanavale. The South Africans had been so confident that they would capture Cuito Cuanavale that UNITA released press statements saying that Cuito Cuanavale had fallen to UNITA. However in failing to breach the defensive positions of the Angolans the South Africans were firing over 20,000 155mm projectiles a day. The Cuban press described the long siege of Cuito Cuanavale as follows:

The Cubans were obliged to accept the challenge and fight on terrain selected by the South Africans while taking measures to strike at the enemy in another direction. On January 13 of this year there was a South African offensive on Cuito Cuanavale and another big attack on February 14 where 150 armored vehicles were used. The second attack was thwarted by a small group of tanks. On February 25, March 1 and March 23 came the last three attacks that were repulsed with heavy losses for the enemy. Thousands of mines were planted which destroyed many South African tanks. The enemy offensive was shattered by the Angolan and Cuban forces.⁴⁶

The South Africans were fighting a conventional war deep inside Angola, a war based on the principles of airland battle where the ground forces were integrated with the air force. But the offensive could not proceed once the South African airforce lost air superiority to the Cuban and Angolan Mig-23s. Moreover, the South Africans were fighting a war with an over-reliance on technology which was not autonomous to the South African society, (e.g. their experimentation with the Israeli drones) and would not be suited for the terrain if the kind of surgical operation that they planned had not succeeded. So after four months of siege on the banks of the Cuito river the Cuban/Angolan forces repulsed the siege and seized the military initiative when the thousands of troops and equipment were bogged down from November to March.

Having repulsed the South African offensive the Cubans and Angolans opened a new front by advancing from the Southwestern section of Angola surrounding the South African forces.

⁴⁵ Robert Jaster, *South Africa in Namibia: The Botha Strategy*, University Press of America, 1985, p 59.

⁴⁶ Statement in *Granma* June 8, 1988.

The South Africans were effectively trapped

So confident were the Cubans and Angolans that for the first time there were maps to show the positions of the Cuban/Angolan forces in Southern Angola. These maps demonstrated that the Angolans had been able to recapture all the remaining positions that had been occupied by the South Africans and the elements of UNITA since Operation Protea in 1981. To consolidate their control of Cunene the Cubans in less than two months built two airstrips complete with hangars and maintenance facilities. The airforce of the Cuban/Angolan forces were now right on the Namibian/Angolan border. In the words of Fidel Castro:

On advancing more than 200 kilometers, our armored units, which were strongly supported by anti-aircraft weapons were getting far from our air bases. We had to build an airbase as fast as we could, and I will tell you with satisfaction that if there was ever a place where a greater effort than the one we have seen here in our country during the last few days was made it was there in Cahama. In a matter of weeks our troops and our construction workers built an airfield 3,500 meters long, and since it was not enough in a matter of weeks a second one was built.⁴⁷

Trapped and bogged down with their heavy equipment the South Africans in June 1988 tried to break out of the encirclement and attacked the Cuban/Angolan forces at Tchipa on June 27, 1988. In a decisive confrontation which sealed the outcome of the conventional war from 1981–1988 the South Africans were defeated and more than twenty-six white conscripts died in this battle. In an air battle over Calueque dam the South Africans were pounced by the Angolan airforce confirming that the days of South African control of the skies was over. It was a strange twist of history for it was from this same dam that the South Africans had launched their invasion of Angola 13 years earlier in 1975.

"A crushing humiliation"

The death of the white conscripts intensified the opposition inside South Africa as families began to bury the youths who were dying in a far away land. One South African newspaper called the defeat of the South Africans "a crushing humiliation." It said, "Africa's strongest army is without certain air superiority in a war which more resembles the trenches of the Somme than more familiar counterinsurgency war of modern times"⁴⁸

The reversals in Angola intensified the anti-war movement in South Africa with over 143 conscripts refusing to serve in the SADF.

The battles at Cuito Cuanavale were the fiercest in Africa since World War II. After the failure of the March offensive the South Africans were forced to the negotiating table. As in the Geneva discussions in 1981 the South Africans dithered hoping to use the negotiations to reassess its military options. For this

⁴⁷ Speech by Fidel Castro, July 25, 1988. Reported in *Granma* August, 1988.

⁴⁸ *Weekly Mail*, July 1, 1988. This contrasted sharply with the series of articles in the *New York Times* which was more or less an exercise in disinformation. See, for example an article on July 12, 1988 "South Africa's Strategy on Angola Falls Short, Enhancing Cubans' Role."

reason the talks dragged on for four months at four different locations, London, Cairo, Congo Brazzaville and New York. It was only after the 'humiliating' defeat at Calueque on June 27, that the South Africans agreed to a set of Principles on their withdrawal from Angola and Namibia. One British newspaper correctly said that as far as the agreement on July 14 was concerned the South Africans had two options, either to agree to a cease-fire or surrender.⁴⁹

The cease-fire allowed the South Africans to withdraw without further casualties and by September 1, 1988 all the South African forces with their equipment had crossed into Namibia from Angola. Operation Modular was a turning point in the military history of Africa.

⁴⁹ *Independent*, (United Kingdom) August 10, 1988.

Conclusion

The defeat of the South Africans at Cuito Cuanavale combined the military defeat of apartheid with the on-going political and ideological debate over the question of the ideas of independence and African sovereignty. At different points and time in the history of humanity two different set of ideas clash and this clash of ideas have to be fought out in the battlefield. Cuito Cuanavale was the fulcrum of the clash between the ideas of white supremacy and African liberation. The SADF was fighting to reverse the tide of history and at this conjuncture it could not openly mobilize external support for its cause.

The ideas of apartheid had been promoted in South Africa along with the fetishism of the weapons in the context of the militarization of the South African society. The experiences of the early forays of the SADF in the Frontline States led to the belief that the army could invade and create destruction in other states with impunity. The SADF was also emboldened by the introduction of Stinger missiles and the American support for UNITA which was in fact support for the SADF.

But the real military strength of the state and hence its operational capabilities were blurred by the propaganda of the psychological operations section of the SADF. Total Strategy had become counter productive for information available to the specialized Institutes of Strategic Studies was based on the false information provided for the disinformation campaign of Radio South Africa beamed across the Frontline States. The ideological climate of the eighties compounded the outlook of the South African society.

Western industrial societies can mobilize their population on the basis of patriotism, democracy and anti-communism but the South African state wanted to sustain an industrial army when the society was not democratic, the masses of blacks were opposed to the state and the real cause of the war in the region of Southern Africa was certainly not communism. In the West citizens are willing to subsidize the armed forces through taxation and to die to defend the social system.

In South Africa the military leaders of the State Security Council hoped to support the economic and military requirements of an industrial army from the narrow base of the white population. No society with an army as large as the SADF could fight a war drawn from such a narrow base of the society. Hence the losses on the banks of the Cuito river and at Calueque reverberated throughout the society strengthening the anti-war and democratic forces of the End Conscription Campaign (ECC). The End Conscription Campaign was responding to the challenge of the military establishment of calling on the society to make a greater contribution to the recovery of the military industrial complex. Defence spending in South Africa had increased from R4. 3 billion in 1986 to over 10.3 billion in 1989. This level of spending on repression required an

outline of how restructure the South African economy to lay the foundations for a restructuring by capital to strengthen the forces of control to deal with a prospective government led by a black majority.

A major step forward in the demilitarization of Southern Africa will be to develop a program for economic conversion so that the present factories of the South African military industrial complex are retooled to serve the needs of those who produce the wealth of the society. An essential component of the restructuring of the region of political and intellectual agenda beyond advocacy work. The South Africans along with the support of the media attempted to present the changes in the leadership of South Africa after Botha as substantial reforms in order to mask the dramatic impact of the siege of Cuito Cuanavale on the military and politics in South Africa. In order for the popular democratic forces to transform the political base of the society the lessons of Cuito Cuanavale has to be understood beyond the media conception that the problem was one of the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola. Having decided to negotiate instead of surrendering the South Africans with the assistance of the USA hoped to salvage through negotiations the humiliation of the encirclement at Cuito Cuanavale.

The South Africans with the support of the USA tried to present the negotiations as being centrally concerned with the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola but the reality was that for both the USA and South Africa the siege of Cuito Cuanavale and the defeat of South Africa had demanded a new strategy to mobilize conservative African leaders to carry the support for the anti-communist campaign in Angola.

The involvement of the Cuban forces was the key to the whole question of linkage as it was presented in the American media but the Cuban example had far more profound consequences in the context of the long term relationship between African liberation and socialism.

At the end of the guerilla campaigns in the anti-colonial phase guerilla armies from Algeria to Kenya inherited the colonial state and failed to develop the political bases of the guerilla struggles to empower the people. The Cuban experience pointed to an alternative form of politics.

For the Angolan people the experiences of conventional war can either represent itself as a destructive factor, confirming the destabilization wrought by external forces and the political forms which can sustain UNITA, or can be the basis for the demilitarization of society where the socialist form of the MPLA begin to develop an emancipatory content to unleash popular participation and expression in politics. Due to the historical circumstances in which the MPLA matured in the interstices of the post-colonial state the political leadership has been unable to develop a 'politically autonomous civil society'.

The experiences of nationalization and militarism in other parts of the Third World and Africa has meant that the military and the bureaucracy consume an inordinate share of the social product. During the war when the state was spending over 50 per cent of the budget on armaments the people could be exhorted to suffer hardships and shortages as long as there was a visible external enemy in the form of the SADF occupying the Southern provinces.

In Angola, as in Mozambique, destabilization and war postponed and overshadowed the questions of reconstruction and democracy. These two societies were targeted for massive disruption for after the defeat of Portuguese colonial-

ism the political leadership had expropriated those forces with the capacity to prolong individual capitalist ownership of the means of production. Nationalization and the declaration of socialism, however, did not empower the producing classes nor did it create a significant shift in the productive base of these societies. There was the anomaly of the Angolans fighting the Americans who were at the same time profiting from the petroleum resources of Angola.

Nationalization all over the Third World has been the basis of the consolidation of the bureaucratic forces. Angola applied to join the IMF in 1987 but the US opposed the Angolan application as a means of forcing economic changes which would provide the basis for neo-colonial relations. The Angolan army was able to defeat the South African army but this in the long run could prove to be an easier battle than confronting the inherited weakness of the society.

The legacies of Portuguese rule meant that the bureaucracy is linked to the problems of racial differentiation. Under the deformed racial hierarchy between whites, mestizos, assimilados and the mass of African peasants and workers the problem of race held back the potential of the society as the state did not provide for the social reproduction of the vast majority. New directions on language and the cultural basis of the state will engage the energies of the society as external elements seek to restrain the unity and independence of the Angolan peoples.

The fissions and divisions in the MPLA since its inception reflected the wider social realities of a society recovering from colonialism, war and the crisis of capitalism in Africa. The Angolan peoples are faced with either the choice of popular democratic participation or the reinforcement of militarism disguised in radical rhetoric. Whatever the choice it is for the Angolan people to make as they seek to consolidate their independence and enter the making of their history.

