

BOOK REVIEW



Enrique Ubieta Gomez. *Red Zone: Cuba and the Battle against Ebola in West Africa*. New York: Pathfinder, 2019. Translated from Spanish by Catriona Goss. 250 pp. Maps. Photos. References. Index. \$17.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-60488-114-1.

Infectious diseases at pandemic level have had a devastating impact on humanity for many centuries. Therefore, understanding and managing the vectors and factors that propagate these diseases is paramount to human survival. *Red Zone: Cuba and the battle against Ebola in West Africa* by Enrique Ubieta Gomez represents one effort to understand the role of a nation-state and front-line workers in handling the Ebola crisis. The lessons of cooperation and determination presented in this book can be used in future pandemics, such as the COVID-19 pandemic currently ravaging the world.

The book highlights the roles of the Cuban medical corps (healthcare workers) from Cuba in combating Ebola in West Africa. In addition to discussing their activities in West Africa, the author draws attention to other locations such as South America, Asia, and Southern Africa, where they also responded to disasters. Further, the author reviews the cooperation among medical personnel from different countries that are hitherto geo-political foes. For example, the United States and Cuba had no diplomatic alliance at the time of the Ebola missions, yet healthcare workers put aside national political bickering and worked unitedly to save lives in the “Ebola battlefield” in West Africa. The author presents many glorious moments that the political world can learn from, to help move humanity to a better place. When humans put their political, social, and cultural differences aside, they can achieve higher goals beneficial to all.


The author examines a plethora of factors that exacerbated the Ebola crisis, that future students of public health and policy making could study with reference to combatting pandemics. Such factors include effective cultural and communication methods, along with allaying doubts, misinformation, and uncertainties about the disease. An understanding of these factors and a rejection of misinformation would help in future efforts to fight pandemics.

The book discusses several “specific” reasons for the Ebola outbreak in the section “Ebola: Doubts and Certainties” (187–205). As the author argues, “... many of these reasons are macabre (suspicious) and not credible” (189). For example, it was alleged that the Ebola outbreak was a result of military

experiments or biowarfare and birth control to depopulate the African continent. “One such claim is that in 1982–1987 apartheid South Africa had a biological weapons program designed to kill or sterilize the black population” (189), while others accused the pharmaceutical industries of complicity in creating these new diseases, including Ebola. Generally, there is “the Manichean view of the world divided into ‘good and bad guys’ in the fight to dominate the world with biological warfare” (191–92). The author attempts to persuade readers to examine evidence critically and not accept any speculations.

The intimate personal notes and correspondences between volunteers and their families highlight the significance and power of the silent support of non-medical people to the success of these missions around the world. For example, the private note from one young man, “Dad. Be strong – everything is going to be fine” (207–10) to his ill doctor father in critical condition in a hospital in Europe, highlights the sacrifices of the people.

The book reflects on the Cuban medical brigade’s experiences in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea. In addition to the individual experiences of these healthcare workers, the book also catalogs the relationship between the West African governments (Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea) and Cuba as well as the developed world and the rest of the world. In the section “David, Goliath and other Reflections” (221–46), the author discusses the challenges the world faces when the “superpowers” work in opposition, and the great good that may result if there were cooperation. The good for humanity is greater when such an epidemic can be handled in a united manner to prevent unnecessary deaths. Painfully, such global cooperation was missing during the COVID-19 pandemic, and as a result, millions have been infected and died. Despite some political points presented in favor of communist Cuba, the author masterfully distills the medical experiences, activities, and cooperation between the health workers from diverse countries, with Cuba as the focus. This is a book that will enable scholars to understand the role of politics in fighting future pandemics successfully or otherwise.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Depelchin, Jacques. 2007. “Cuba and The Recentering of African History.” *African Studies Review* 50 (2): 214–19. doi:10.1353/arw.2007.0090.
- Duursma, Allard. 2019. “Mediating Solutions to Territorial Civil Wars in Africa: Norms, Interests, and Major Power Leverage.” *African Studies Review* 62 (3): 65–88. doi:10.1017/asr.2018.103.
- Miller, Ivor. 2000. “A Secret Society Goes Public: The Relationship Between Abakuá and Cuban Popular Culture.” *African Studies Review* 43 (1): 161–88. doi:10.2307/524726.