

Cuba and Angola: Fighting for Africa's Freedom and Our Own

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The political, diplomatic, and social implications of Cuba's engagement with African liberation struggles have just begun to receive the scholarly attention they deserve. Piero Gleijeses' *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria, and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976-1991* (U of North Carolina P, 2013), a continuation of his *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976* (U of North Carolina P, 2002), will undoubtedly become the definitive diplomatic work on the topic. Gleijeses has consistently advanced the once heterodox view that Cuban forays into Algeria, Guinea-Bissau, Zaire, and Angola took place largely on Cuban, not Soviet, terms. Indeed, much of the new diplomatic scholarship on the topic, which posits Cuban "idealism" on one hand and African "gratitude" on the other, highlights the profoundly ideological nature of these campaigns. That Cuba undertook its most extended African intervention in Angola at a moment of budding political rapprochement with the United States appears to lend weight to the primacy of idealistic over geostrategic motivations, in sharp contrast to Henry Kissinger's cynical *realpolitik*. On both sides, however, the ideological stakes of the Angolan conflict, which became a critical testing ground of Cold War alliances, were unmistakably weighty.

The struggle against Portuguese imperialism in Angola had simmered for over a decade before Cuban involvement. Anti-colonial resistance directly contributed to the fall of the dictatorship of António de Oliveira Salazar in Portugal in the 1974 Carnation Revolution, which ultimately impelled Portuguese withdrawal and independence in Angola. Nevertheless, the realization of independence also gave rise to inter-factional struggles between the three groups principally responsible for its achievement: the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA), and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). The Angolan civil war quickly became a battleground in the global Cold War, with the United States, apartheid-era South Africa, and Zaire supporting the FNLA and UNITA after the early withdrawal of Chinese and North Korean support, and

Cuba and the Soviet Union bolstering the MPLA. Many of these contacts predated Angolan independence, but quickly escalated in a context of civil war.

The Cuban entrance into the conflict at the personal solicitation of MPLA leaders was initially to be limited to military training. Ultimately, however, over the course of more than a decade, 375,000 Cuban volunteers, along with 50,000 additional civilian participants, would make their way to Angola. Early successes in beating back the South African advance depended in no small measure on Cuban support, and Cuban participation would also prove crucial at the 1988 victory over South African troops at Cuito Cuanavale, which led to the final attainment of Angolan and Namibian independence and the decisive weakening of apartheid in South Africa. Two years later, Nelson Mandela would also be freed, and, in a widely publicized speech, he personally thanked "the Cuban 'internationalists,' who had 'done so much to free our continent'" (73).

Cuba and Angola: Fighting for Africa's Freedom and Our Own (New York: Pathfinder, 2013), an edited volume of speeches and firsthand accounts from the Angolan intervention, also proffers this vision of Cuban idealism and African gratitude. It is thus somewhat difficult to assess the compilation in scholarly terms, given its non-academic framing and its unabashed admiration for the Cuban leadership of the campaign. The book's aims thus diverge notably from the nuanced, if still largely positive, account presented by Piero Gleijeses, which marshals an impressive array of previously classified documentation from six countries, including Cuba. Nevertheless, the historical documents compiled in the volume do contain information of scholarly value, providing a useful lens onto the significance of Angola in Cuba itself.

As a result of the campaign, for example, internationalism was increasingly claimed as an integral part of the Cuban revolutionary project. The invocation by many participants of a century-long internationalist tradition—from José Martí to Angola—exemplifies the political "Cubanization" of the campaign, as does Fidel Castro's branding of Angola as an "African Girón," in

reference to the Cuban victory over a 1961 U.S. invasion at the Bay of Pigs. Even more telling is Castro's insistence, in an April 1976 speech delivered on the fifteenth anniversary of that defeat, that, for the "Yankee imperialists," Angola also "[represented] an African Girón" (36). Here and elsewhere, officials reminded Cubans at home of the Revolution's international stature and its autonomy in assuming that role. Cuban sacrifices on the world stage would thus fuel a continuous revolutionary tradition at home, even as those same sacrifices guaranteed that Cuba would continue to play an outsized role on the global stage.

These documents also provide evidence of the cultural and racial reverberations of the Cuban mission in Angola. In a macro-political sense, the Angolan experience has been credited with the official reconceptualization of Cuba as a paradigmatically African—and, consequently, Caribbean—site. This shift is an area of emergent academic and artistic interest, and scholars such as Christabelle Peters have brought attention to the enduring echoes of the Angola-Cuba bond (*Cuban Identity and the Angolan Experience*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), while several recent art exhibitions, including *AfroCuba: Works on Paper, 1968-2003*, have featured the diverse experiences of Cubans in Angola. The racial question is also paramount in the historical documents included in *Cuba and Angola*. In a speech delivered to a mass rally in December 1975, for example, Fidel Castro declared Cuba to be both a "Latin-American" and a "Latin-African nation"; "African blood," he effused, "flows freely through our veins" (31). Even the name given to the mission in Angola—"Operation Carlota," in reference to the leader of a slave revolt in colonial Cuba—symbolically cemented this change.

Contact with the mythical "motherland" was undoubtedly transformative for a generation of Cuban artists, musicians, writers, and religious leaders. As Gabriel García Márquez noted in his 1977 essay on Operation Carlota, the traces of this interface could be found everywhere in Cuba, from a "new men's fashion for lightweight suits with short-sleeved jackets" to "Portuguese words... heard in the streets" (135). Nevertheless, more ambivalent echoes could also be discerned in the "noisier" discussions "in the lines in front of stores and in the crowded buses, between those who had been determined partisans of the action in Angola and those just now beginning to grasp what it meant" (135).

Those dynamics extended to the Cuban volunteers themselves, as they faced the on-the-ground prospect of identification, both tantalizing and ephemeral. Some Cuban participants were deemed to be virtually identical to their Angolan counterparts, so much so that a joke began to circulate that they could only be distinguished by "touching the tips of their noses," in reference to the "way [the Africans] were carried as babies, with their faces pressed against their mothers' backs" (131). In other cases, however, relationships between white Cubans and Angolans were more "hostile" (132). Cuban volunteers appear to have struggled with the discrepancy between an official stance of "fraternal" engagement with their Angolan comrades and a reality of unavoidable difference. Cuban officials presented these differences in terms of "culture" and "civilization," particularly with regard to the problematic "superstitions" encountered in past African interventions.¹ That Angolan members of the MPLA were regarded as more "revolutionary" and therefore more "advanced in organization and political culture" than Cuba's allies in the Congo speaks to the hazy frontier between identification and dis-identification bound up in the official—and popular—reimagining of Cuba as an "African" nation (27).

More personal reflections about the Angolan intervention are fleeting and mostly inaccessible in *Cuba and Angola*, due to the editor's decision to give primacy of place to official and highly politicized voices. Nevertheless, a new generation of scholarship has already begun to move popular memory of Angola to the center of historical analysis. Ultimately, only by incorporating these other voices, both celebratory and more ambivalent, will we begin to understand the lasting impact of Cuba's overseas campaigns, moving beyond truisms to do justice to the lived reality of participants and those who awaited their return.

Jennifer Lambe
Brown University

ENDNOTES

- 1 For example, see Fidel Castro, "Consolidating a Powerful Bulwark against Apartheid South Africa," September 1975, pp. 27-28.