

**Harry Villegas, *Cuba and Angola: The War for Freedom* (London: Pathfinder Press, 2017), pb 121pp. ISBN-13: 9781604880939**

Reviewed by Daliany Jerónimo Kersh

*Cuba and Angola: The War for Freedom* is one in a series of books on Cuban internationalist missions by the publisher Pathfinder Press. The book is an eye-witness account of a Cuban Brigadier General, revealed during a series of interviews that took place between 2009 and 2016, who served three terms in Angola. Harry Villegas also acted as a military attaché and go-between for the Cuban headquarters stationed in Angola and Fidel Castro, Commander-in-Chief of the Cuban Armed Forces.

Villegas' first-hand testimony is not only an account of the Cuban civilian and military missions in Angola between 1975 and 1991 but also an account of his personal interactions with Fidel. From the perspective of a Cuba specialist, these anecdotes add to the value of this book, but from the perspective of a lecturer in African and Cold War history, they distract from the historical events, and the story is very much depicted from a Cuban viewpoint to the neglect of the Angolan one. Although it does briefly touch on African social phenomena such as tribalism, the use of child soldiers and ethnic conflicts created by colonially defined borders.

Angola, like other Portuguese colonies such as Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique, gained its independence after the fascist dictatorship of the *Estado Novo* was overthrown by a military coup in 1974. Whereas power was ceded to the most prominent political factions in the other former colonies, Angola had three main political groups: the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola), FNLA (People's Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola) and UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola), which all had very distinct leaderships and support networks. What ensues is a civil war set among the backdrop of the Cold War and further complicated by irregular and sustained invasions by apartheid South Africa. According to Villegas, the MPLA asked for Cuban support as early as 1965, and none other than Che Guevara himself promised this.

Between 1975 and 1991, Cuba sent 425,000 'volunteers' to help their 'African sister' Angola although I am not sure how many really 'volunteered' when the casualties sustained were so high. Whereas the book estimates there were 2,100 Cuban fatalities, I have previously heard quotes as high as 5,000 and have also heard many Cubans refer to the Angolan campaign as Cuba's 'Vietnam'; a pointless political struggle in a far-off land. The book also briefly describes Cuba's simultaneous mission in Ethiopia.

It was surprising to learn that Cuban soldiers only engaged in military combat against South African invasions (1975–88) and in the defence of Cuban volunteers, as well as the fact that they only provided training and ammunition to the MPLA, refusing to take part in the civil war between Angolans. Aside from military and medical support, Cubans also contributed to the Angolan economy by helping with coffee cultivation, harvesting and distribution. It was also interesting that there was a photo of a women's regiment stationed in Angola; I had previously read Cuban women were not encouraged to go to Africa during the 1970s, but unfortunately women's contribution was never mentioned in the testimony.

Harry Villegas, one of the most highly decorated Cuban soldiers, is most certainly a person of historical importance. Not only did he take part in the guerrilla combat of the Cuban revolution, but he also served as Che Guevara's bodyguard for a decade, accompanying him on missions to Bolivia and the Congo prior to his assassination in 1967. The interviews (often conducted by 'Calero' who incidentally is not one of the editors, and we never learn who he is) guide Villegas through a series of specific questions informed by extensive prior research based on a number of similar publications published in Cuba at the same time. As an oral historian, I would have liked to have seen more open-style questions and the testimony coming more organically from Villegas himself; he is quite a character and his first-hand experiences are rich in detail.

The strength of this book therefore is Villegas' personal reflections and anecdotes about the events that transpired in Angola. The highlights are the story of the Cuban pilot who 'accidentally' bombed a civilian village who Fidel insisted be tried by the Angolans; the 'Ochoa scandal' where the head of the Cuban mission from 1987 to 1988 stole and tried to smuggle diamonds out of the country; the friction between Cuba and the Soviet Union, with the latter employing a 'Battle of Berlin' mentality; and Raúl Castro saying, 'if necessary, we'd go without underpants', referring to Cuba's commitment to the MPLA's struggle.

The book is set out chronologically which would be of benefit to those not familiar with the historiography. As is the timeline at the end of the book which not only puts the events within a Cuban and African context but also within an international context charting events such as the Grenada invasion and the Iran–Contra scandal. The book is also enhanced by a series of photos (mainly of jubilant crowds and military or political personalities), excerpts from speeches and quotes by Nelson Mandela, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and Raúl Castro.

However, the book is clearly driven by a politically motivated agenda. Whereas Cuban troops did perhaps 'set an example', it may stretch credulity that the MPLA was such a model army and that UNITA was alone in committing acts of aggression against civilians during a very long and bitter struggle. Some

more factual content about the extent of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) resources and training provided to UNITA and the political and economic reasoning behind Washington's support of the apartheid regime would also have been helpful. Some might find that Fidel's contribution is overstated as perhaps also is Cuba's role in ending the apartheid regime in South Africa. While Mandela has often praised Cuba for its unwavering support, we must not underestimate the African National Congress' (ANC's) own contribution in the form of peaceful boycotts, strikes and demonstrations and later acts of sabotage. The legacy of Cuba's involvement did however in the words of Mandela break 'the myth of the invincibility of the white oppressors' and therefore inspired other post-colonial struggles throughout the continent.

While this book is not academic and therefore not researched or written with disciplined and reflexive rigour, it is valuable to students interested in Cuba's campaign in Angola. It should be recommended to students as a legitimate historical source if they were specifically writing an essay on this topic. The sense is that the book is predominantly aimed at a politicised left-wing readership who will welcome it with aplomb.

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