

Cuba's Heroic Role Against Apartheid South Africa and US-Backed Mercenaries in Angola

By [Prof. Horace Campbell](#)

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In Angola in the spring of 1988 the armed forces of apartheid South Africa and the US-backed mercenaries of Jonas Savimbi were defeated by the combined force of the Cuban military, the Angolan army, and the military units of the liberation movements of South Africa and Namibia. This led directly to the independence of Namibia and then to the fall of the apartheid regime in South Africa itself. Cuba's heroic role is the outstanding example of principled anti-imperialist internationalism in the last decades of the twentieth century. ([See a map of Angola below.](#))

We celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of these events by reprinting the account by Horace Campbell that appeared in Monthly Review in April 1989, with some pride at having published so sharp an analysis of current events—events largely ignored by the mass media then and since. We then present a military-focused historical analysis by Monthly Review Press author Ronnie Kasrils, who had the extraordinary fate to have headed ANC military intelligence in the battle alongside the Cubans, and then to have served for five years as Deputy Minister of Defense in the post-apartheid South African government—in regular contact with officers who had commanded the opposing forces. —The Editors

Introduction

Ten years after United Nations Resolution 435 laid the basis for an independent Namibia, the South Africans agreed to withdraw from the territory they still occupied in defiance of international opinion. In a ceremony at UN headquarters in New York on December 22, 1988, an agreement was signed by Angola, Cuba, and South Africa, with the United States ostensibly acting as mediator. This accord was a major step toward self-determination for the peoples of Southern Africa, for it finally gave the United Nations Transitional Group the go-ahead to implement steps for the withdrawal of South African troops from Namibia and the return of refugees, elections, and independence to the former Portuguese colony. This historic agreement came not because of the tenacious negotiating of U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Chester Crocker, but because of the decisive military defeat of the South African forces at Cuito Cuanavale in Angola (see map on page 43).

Between October 1987 and June 1988, in the fiercest conventional battles on African soil since Erwin Rommel was defeated at El Amien, the South African Defence Forces (SADF) fought pitched tank and artillery battles with the Angolan army (FAPLA, the People's Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola) and its Cuban supporters at Cuito Cuanavale. This small base located in southeastern Angola became important in the military history of Africa, for there the South African army, supposedly the best on the continent, was trapped with its tanks and artillery and held down more than 300 miles from its bases in Namibia. Failing to

take Cuito Cuanavale with over 9,000 soldiers, even after announcing that it had done so, losing air superiority, and faced with mutinies among black troops and a high casualty rate among whites, the South Africans reached such a desperate situation that President Botha had to fly to the war zone when the operational command of the SADF broke down.

With Cuban reinforcements, the Angolans withstood major assaults on January 23, February 25, and March 23. The South Africans were repulsed with heavy losses, and the Angolan/Cuban forces seized the initiative. For the first time since 1981, the Angolan army was able to reoccupy the area adjacent to Namibia. So confident were the Angolans and Cubans, that in the space of less than three months they built two air strips to consolidate their recapture of the southern province of Cunene. Trapped by the rainy season, bogged down by the terrain, and encircled, the South Africans made one desperate attempt to break out on June 27 and were again defeated. One South African newspaper called the defeat “a crushing humiliation.”

These episodes of war were followed by diplomatic initiatives that the South Africans had previously been able to block. After the March 23 reversals at Cuito Cuanavale, the South Africans started talks that culminated in the December 22 agreement. For the Angolans, who had been fighting continuously since 1961, the war and diplomacy were focused not only on the limited question of the South African withdrawal from Angola, but also on ending South African destabilization of the region and on independence for Namibia. Diplomatic initiatives accelerated after the South Africans failed to break out of their encirclement at Tchipo on June 27. Only then could the frontline combatants and the United States agree on the basis for withdrawal of the South Africans from Angola.

The Militarization of Africa

To understand the war in Angola and Southern Africa, it is crucial to comprehend militarization both at the basic level of arms transfers, weapons systems, military expenditures, and armed intervention, and also at the broader level of state power. Militarization in Southern Africa is the process by which the South African state attempts to solve its political contradictions by means of force. Its fetishism of weapons systems has become interwoven with the mystique of white superiority, as the South African army has spread all kinds of warfare across Southern Africa. It is always necessary to bear in mind the larger issues underlying militarization in Southern Africa, so that the implications of the military defeat of the South Africans for the political, social, and economic transformation of Africa can be seen.

War has always speeded the transformation or regression of society. Many times a particular battle like Cuito Cuanavale becomes decisive and becomes the basis for a change in the overall struggle of which it is a part. Von Clausewitz spoke of defense as a higher form of warfare when both combatants have the same means. This principle was important in the context of the military defeat of the South Africans, for in the siege of Cuito Cuanavale, the Angolans were not only defending their own sovereignty but also fighting for the self-determination of the African people.

Von Clausewitz also said that “no one starts a war without being clear in their mind what the real objectives are, and what they intend to achieve. The first is the political purpose and the second is the operational objective.” In the context of the war in Southern Africa, the South Africans confused their political objectives with their operational objectives and with what was actually possible given the limitations of the form of organization of South African

society. Because of what South Africa represents, the fetishism of weapons became interwoven with the mystique of white superiority. But the South African militarists underestimated the capacity of the African people to resist apartheid, both outside and inside South Africa.

Militarization in Southern Africa stems from two sources: (1) Africa's ties to the global armaments culture, and (2) the unfinished decolonization process in Africa. It encompasses all the techniques of modern military warfare, but the principal cause of its persistence is the attempt by South Africa to perpetuate a form of government that has become outmoded.

In all societies, Marx said, there is a point where the changes in the material relations can be measured with the precision of natural science. In Southern Africa, these changes have undermined the idea of separate development. At the political, philosophical, and cultural level men and women have come to understand what has happened and are fighting to transform society. In Southern Africa, there is a war between the old idea of white domination and the new idea of black liberation, as well as a clash between weapons systems, forms of political organization, and the cultures of Europe and Africa. The point where these contradictions are concentrated is the state of South Africa, where the white ruling class can no longer rule by normal means.

In the townships, there are 39,000 troops that enforce the subjugation of the African people. This brutality is so well documented that there is a United Nations arms embargo against South Africa. But this militarization of state and society has failed to crush the resistance of the democratic forces. The state of emergency—involving a ban on all political groups, the imprisonment even of nine-year-old children, and the holding of an entire society under siege—reflects the failure of apartheid to legitimate itself through ideological means.

No society can be ruled by force on a day-to-day basis. As Napoleon once said, "One can do anything with bayonets but sit on them." Political stability requires that there be a coherent, widely accepted ideology that gives the oppressors confidence in their right to rule and resigns the oppressed to their subordination. In South Africa, the ideology of white supremacy has fallen apart. To postpone the inevitable reorganization of the region, the South Africans carry war to those societies that have articulated a higher form of social organization, at both the level of racial democracy and that of the planned use of resources for the majority of the population. This desperation of the South Africans in the face of challenges to their racist order explains the intensity of the wars in Angola and Mozambique, wars that have cost these societies thousands of lives and more than \$30 billion.

It is important to understand the scope and nature of the spread of the apartheid war machine across Southern Africa:

1. The South Africa-backed contra war in Mozambique has devastated the country. More than a million Mozambicans have been driven from their communities, over 250,000 have been killed or maimed, and the whole economy of Mozambique has been irreparably damaged. The territorial integrity of Mozambique is upheld by the intervention of Zimbabwean troops (and, until IMF pressures forced their withdrawal, by Tanzanian troops).
2. There is a war of economic destabilization against the nine states of the Southern Africa Development Coordinating Conference—Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

South Africa supported a coup in Lesotho in 1986 and backed an unsuccessful mercenary intervention in the Seychelles in 1981. It was behind a coup attempt in Tanzania in 1983 and has provided continuous support for armed elements in Zimbabwe since independence. The South Africans have carried out raids on Maputo (Mozambique), Harare (Zimbabwe), and Gaborone (Botswana), and attacked refugees in Swaziland.

3. There is a counterinsurgency war in Namibia. Here the South Africans have over 120,000 troops, making it one of the most militarized spaces on the earth. This war has spilled over into a conventional war in Angola.

The Struggle For Independence in Angola

Angola does not border South Africa. This point is important to understanding why the South Africans became militarily involved there. A major reason was that the Angolan economy is not as integrated into the South African economy as the other economies of Southern Africa are.

Angola is potentially one of the wealthiest countries in Africa, and international capital is still involved in a fierce competition for its resources. It is one of Africa's leading oil producers, and before 1973 it was a major diamond and coffee source, and, with a population of just over 8 million, has been underpopulated since the time of the slave trade. Portugal was so poor that it could never fully exploit the resources of its colony and opened it to capital from other exploiters. U.S. investments dominated in petroleum, British capital in diamonds and the Benguela railway, German capital in the iron mines at Kassinga, and Japanese, French, and other capital in other resources. This multinational character of capital in Angola meant that Portugal was *de facto* administering its colony on behalf of the European Economic Community and the United States.

The anticolonial struggle took international form from the outset, because the external orientation of the Portuguese colonies influenced the evolution of the liberation movements: their origins, ideological outlook, political orientation, and external support.

Three movements emerged out of the fragmented colonial situation:

1. The MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) was the oldest and was rooted in the urban working class. This party, led by Agostino Neto, was linked to the intelligentsia, the educated mulattoes, and the workers in the segregated ghettos of Luanda. It was this party that largely carried out the anticolonial war and effectively thwarted foreign intervention on the eve of independence.
2. The UPA ([Union of Peoples of Angola](#)) was originally formed as part of the attempt of sections of the Congolese aristocracy to link up with the rebelling masses of the regions adjacent to Zaire. Founded by Holden Roberto, it changed its name to the Front for the Liberation of Angola (FLNA) as part of an attempt to go beyond a tribal basis and reach out to groups not previously in the UPA. FLNA never seriously fought the Portuguese, and information is now coming out about the treachery of this organization, which the South Africans tried to place in power in 1975.
3. UNITA (Union for the Total Liberation of Angola) was formed in 1966 by the foreign minister of FLNA, Jonas Savimbi. He broke away from the FLNA, saying

that its leadership was tribalist and captive to the CIA. Whatever political capital UNITA may have had (and this is all quite questionable now, given the revelation that Savimbi had been linked to the Portuguese army) was certain to evaporate once UNITA allied with the South Africans.

The First Defeat of South Africa, 1975–1976

The anticolonial struggle in Angola, which led to the 1974 coup in Portugal, was a turning point for Southern Africa. South Africa intervened with CIA support by land, sea, and air to stop the MPLA from coming to power. The Angolans asked for Cuban help to defeat the invasion led by South Africans, Zairian regulars, and CIA mercenaries. The South African invasion was turned back outside Luanda. South Africa never accepted its defeat; the 1987–1988 siege of Cuito Cuanavale was only the most recent in a number of stages in the ensuing military buildup. But the 1976 defeat at Luanda, and that in Mozambique a year earlier, also inspired the generation that was maturing in the South African townships. The 1976 Soweto uprisings and their aftermath formed an important watershed in the militarization of the state and society in Southern Africa.

It was after the first defeat in Angola and the uprisings in Soweto that the generals of the SADF formulated the “Total Strategy,” a multidimensional preparation for war, involving a political strategy (the support of dissident groups to oppose liberation movements all over the region); an economic strategy (creating dependence on South African transport, communications, air traffic, rails, harbors, agriculture, mining equipment—in effect, ensuring that the region remain open to South African capital); psychological warfare (promoting the idea that Africans cannot rule themselves, that Africans are inferior); and a military strategy. Their intention was to have the Total Strategy be primarily political, economic, and psychological, making the military effort secondary.

After the defeat in Angola and the uprisings in Soweto, a number of stages led up to the South African humiliation at Cuito Cuanavale.

The War in 1976–1980

In this period, the South Africans were on the defensive politically and diplomatically, but were staging a massive military buildup in Namibia. They began conscription, constructed new military bases, and made raids against the Southwest African People’s Organization (SWAPO), which had moved its headquarters to Luanda from Dar es Salaam after 1976. Thousands of youths dodged conscription in the tribal regiments and joined SWAPO.

It was at this point that the South Africans organized UNITA, which had previously been wandering in Angola without a clear mission. The role of UNITA changed drastically when the Carter administration persuaded the Chinese to give it 800 tons of weapons. This kind of weaponry enabled UNITA to wage conventional war; its officers were trained in Morocco, and it was thoroughly integrated into the military strategy of the SADF. This was a strange twist of history, for UNITA got its first weapons from SWAPO, to fight against the Portuguese. UNITA was now used to track SWAPO while the South African air force bombed its concentrations in Angola. It was in one such raid that the South Africans carried out the Kassinga massacre, in which over 800 people were killed at a SWAPO refugee camp in 1978. The ensuing international outcry led to the adoption of UN Resolution 435 in 1978, detailing steps leading to the independence of Namibia: briefly, the withdrawal of South African troops, the return of Namibian refugees, UN-supervised elections, and the “granting” of

independence.

Phase Two: 1981-1984

The 1980 Republican electoral victory in the United States emboldened the South African government. Washington and Pretoria vowed that there should be no red flag over Windhoek. In this climate, the South Africans began a major conventional war in Angola, and the United States developed its policy of “constructive engagement and linkage.” In simple terms, this policy was a way for the South Africans to buy time to deepen apartheid structures in Namibia while Chester Crocker used the international media to divert attention from South African atrocities by linking the independence of Namibia to the withdrawal of the Cubans from Angola.

From 1981 to 1988, the SADF occupied the provinces of Cunene and Cuando Cubango in Angola. FAPLA, the Angolan army, was not prepared for this massive invasion of over 11,000 troops with the most sophisticated artillery pieces available. The South African command closely coordinated its air force and army. If the army found resistance, the air arm came in with surgical bombing strikes and then the ground troops moved forward. The provincial capital of Ngiva was sacked. Over 100,000 peasants fled their homes. The southern provinces of Angola were occupied until December of 1981, and the SADF did not withdraw even after the UN Resolution condemning the invasion. The SADF used this occupation to put elements of UNITA in place on the Namibian-Angolan border.

A major South African objective was to destabilize Angola so that the reconstruction of its economy would be postponed. UNITA carried out attacks on economic targets, especially railways, and kidnapped expatriate workers. UNITA’s headquarters was moved to Jamba, near the Namibian border, in order to be more closely integrated into the South African command structure.

The Lusaka Accord of 1984

The next major South African invasion took place in August 1983. Here UNITA announced it had taken Cangamba. The South African air force destroyed it and turned the rubble over to UNITA to show off to journalists flown in from Zambia. South Africa wanted UNITA to take Cuvelai so that the front of the war could be driven northward. Its self-confidence was heightened by the invasion of Grenada, when anticommunist rhetoric in the United States reached an incredible peak. The South African government intended an all-out attack on Luanda, the capital of Angola. This was a case in which operational objectives were confused with the political rhetoric of anticommunism. The South African generals said that it was operationally impossible to take Luanda, but the Magnus Malan faction within the State Security Council wanted to intensify the war. The Angolans were getting more experienced, and the South Africans’ Operation Askari failed. This failure led the United States to intercede on behalf of South African troops encircled in Angola. The resulting accord was named after the Zambian capital, Lusaka. It set up a joint military commission to oversee the withdrawal of South African troops.

South Africa was increasingly caught in a complex contradiction. The conscription of blacks into its armed forces was limited by the racism of the white ruling class. The army, therefore, had to be mainly white, and the domestic labor force to be mainly black. But black factory workers knew they were producing weapons to be used against their sisters, brothers, and children, and they resisted. Only an end to racist practices could have

resolved the military dilemma of the whites, but in that event there would be no political dilemma remaining to be resolved by military means. This fact should be uppermost in the minds of those who want to conceptualize the nature of the military in South Africa after apartheid.

The Third Period: 1984-1987

In September, FAPLA forces started to drive against Jamba, near the Namibian border. South Africa intervened, but with the uprisings in the townships it could not carry the battle and called upon the United States to help. The United States supplied Stinger missiles to UNITA and \$15 million additional aid. UNITA itself lacked the administrative and military infrastructure to manage this assistance, which in fact went indirectly to the South Africans. During the siege of Cuito Cuanavale, Savimbi complained that the South Africans worked out the cost of the battle and told him he had to "ask his friends to pay." The United States also reactivated the base at Kamina in Zaire, where the CIA was dropping supplies for the South Africans via UNITA. The U.S. support for UNITA, and in essence the SADF, led to the final stage of the war.

The Defeat of the SADF

Operation Modular Hooper was launched to seize Menongue and set up a provisional UNITA government as a pretext for increased U.S. support. Building the roads and transporting heavy equipment for over 9,000 SADF regulars took six months.

The Angolans launched an offensive against Savimbi's base areas in southeastern Angola, and the battle at the Lomba River was the preamble to the big battle at Cuito Cuanavale, where the Angolans decided to set up a defensive line. The SADF started its siege in November of 1987. When they faced stiff resistance from the Angolans, the operational command of the SADF broke down. It was at this point that President Botha had to boost the morale of his troops in person. This visit prompted the fortification of the Angolan position by the Cubans, who had been out of direct fighting since 1981. The Cuban command calculated that if the FAPLA defensive line broke the Cuban forces themselves would be threatened. The siege of Cuito Cuanavale now involved all the combatants of the Angolan theater of the war: the Angolans, the Cubans, SWAPO, and the ANC on one side; and the SADF, the Americans, and UNITA on the other.

Supported by radar on the ground, Angolan and Cuban MiG 23s proved superior to the South African Air Force. With its air force grounded and its tanks stopped by mines and difficult terrain, the besieging force was reduced to shelling Cuito Cuanavale at long range for three months. In major ground battles in January, February, and March, the South Africans failed to take it.

By the time of the March attack, the conditions of battle had begun to turn against the SADF. First there was a mutiny by the conscripted troops of the Southwest African Territorial Force. The South Africans were racist even in military tactics, and placed black troops in front of the white troops to bear the brunt of the fighting. Second, the heavy equipment bogged down on the eastern bank of the Cuito during the rainy season. Most important, without air support, the South Africans were outgunned by the Angolans. By the end of March the South African siege was over and the South Africans themselves were trapped and under siege.

The war became more and more unpopular in South Africa when young whites began coming home in body bags. This intensified the End Conscription campaign in South Africa and forced the South Africans to take steps leading to the talks among the principal combatants: the Angolans, the Cubans, the South Africans, and the United States. (It is important to see the United States as a combatant, and not as a peacemaker, as the Western media have suggested.) So confident were the Cubans and Angolans after repulsing the South Africans that in the space of two months they built two airfields to consolidate their control of the southern provinces. At this point the United States attempted to open a new front in the north with UNITA. The calculation was that as long as UNITA was integrated into the SADF there would be little popular support for it in the United States. The U.S. military carried out exercises called Operation Flintlock in May to drop supplies for UNITA, hoping to relieve the trapped South African forces.

The reversal of the South Africans' military fortunes was sealed at Tchipa on June 27, 1988. Here the SADF tried to open a new front to relieve the troops trapped at Cuito Cuanavale. In this decisive battle, the FAPLA forces confirmed their air superiority. When the news of their defeat at Calueque Dam reached South Africa, more young whites protested against the draft. One South African newspaper called the battle of Tchipa "a crushing humiliation." It said, "The SADF resembled the trenches of the Somme, rather than the troops of a mobile counterinsurgency force."

The Conference Table

The talks and jockeying about the independence in Namibia should be seen as an attempt to win at the conference table what South Africa had lost in battle. But in reality the South Africans had only two genuine choices: to negotiate a capitulation or to surrender openly. The siege of Cuito Cuanavale ended after the SADF agreed to withdraw from Namibia. There was dithering at the diplomatic level as the prime minister of South Africa tried to get Zaire to continue the war, the Americans tried through third parties to pressure Angola to form a government of national unity with UNITA, and the Western press tried to link the South African retreat to the withdrawal of the Cuban troops from Angola. The United States has since used its influence in the UN Security Council to water down Resolution 435 by limiting the deployment of UN troops in Namibia. At the same time, the South Africans are deploying former commandos of Koevet, a death squad-type organization, in an attempt to prevent a massive victory by SWAPO. But the siege of Cuito Cuanavale was a turning point in the process of militarization in Africa. It opened the way for the genuine decolonization of Namibia.

Conclusion

Our focus on the military has been guided by the way in which militarism has compounded the crisis of reconstruction in Africa. Angola has suffered disproportionately, and its economy has had to postpone reorganization in order to meet the South African invasion. In the past three years, more than 50 percent of the Angolan budget had to be spent on weapons. The Angolans will inherit refugees, amputees, demolished homes, and a destroyed economic infrastructure after this war. The political and economic challenges facing the Angolan society will be as formidable as the military battles with the SADF were.

War has profound effects on any society, and the impact of Cuito Cuanavale is still unfolding in Southern Africa. In Namibia, SWAPO and others struggling for independence now have renewed confidence. The siege of Cuito Cuanavale has changed the military balance in

Southern Africa on the side of liberation; self-determination, not white domination, is the agenda of Africa today. But the cost of the war also highlighted the tremendous burdens that have been placed on the African peoples who bear the brunt of capitalist oppression. The political and economic battles they now face will be as demanding as the military struggles from which they have so recently emerged victorious. These tasks confront a generation that has matured in the post-independence period. The unfolding of this process will have repercussions well beyond Africa.



Interested readers can find the endnotes from the original version in the [Monthly Review archives](#) (available to subscribers).

Horace Campbell is Professor of African American Studies and Political Science at Syracuse University. He is the author of Global NATO and the Catastrophic Failure in Libya: Lessons for Africa in the Forging of African Unity (Monthly Review Press, forthcoming), as well as Rasta and Resistance: From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney (1987) and Barack Obama and 21st Century Politics: A Revolutionary Moment in the USA (2010).

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