

A glimpse of the “enemy”

Gennady Shubin and Andrei Tokarev (eds), *Bush War: The Road to Cuito Cuanvale: Soviet Soldiers’ Accounts of the Angolan War*

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The publication of a South African edition of the recollections of Soviet military advisers who served in Angola during the late 1970s and 1980s is something of an anomaly in the burgeoning corpus of literature on the regional conflict. The Russian edition formed part of a series called the *Oral History of Forgotten Wars*. The war might be forgotten throughout the length and breadth of the erstwhile Soviet empire but in South Africa there is currently considerable interest in the history and legacy of the conflict. Internet sites, memoirs, novels, as well as photographic and art exhibits that include “Border War” or “Bush War” in the title have proliferated. The use of the latter phrase in the title of the book under review is obviously a marketing ploy that seeks to capitalise on its recognition value for South African readers. It almost certainly does not feature in the Russian vocabulary about the Angolan War.

The editors have compiled an assortment of oral testimonies, diary entries, memoirs and reflections of Soviet advisers, specialists and translators that add up to a rather fractured collection. The narratives have clearly not been selected on account of their literary qualities for most of the pieces are poorly constructed and anything but compelling reading. For instance, the lengthiest chapter by the interpreter Igor Zhdarkin comprises extracts from notebooks kept during his tour of duty in Angola supplemented with the texts of telegrams sent to the Military District Commander and retrospective comments which serve to elucidate the content of the entries. This is followed by a chapter in which Zhdarkin reflects on certain aspects of his experience in Angola. Even when taken together these chapters do not make for a seamless story. Indeed, this reader was hard pressed to retain an interest in the individual stories. They might be first-hand accounts but they simply do not hold one's attention. So instead of being drawn into the Soviet experience of the Angolan War, I found myself asking what these stories revealed about other participants. I was particularly keen to see whether the Soviet accounts challenged or contradicted commonplace South African understandings of the conflict.

South African military histories are preoccupied with three events that occurred on Angolan soil: Operation Savannah; the Cassinga "massacre"; and the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale. Each of these episodes has engendered a voluminous literature and considerable controversy. The Soviet soldiers' accounts share some of these concerns. The first advisors in southern Angola apparently arrived in October 1976, so there is no discussion of Operation Savannah (or its Cuban counterpart, Carlota). The events of 4 May 1978 receive only passing mention, but the protracted conflict near Cuito Cuanavale between September 1987 and July 1988 is clearly the focus of attention. This is suggested by the book's sub-title, as well as the space devoted to the final phase of the Angolan War.

Prior to the establishment of the Pechora anti-aircraft system in southern Angola, the South African Air Force (SAAF) was able to carry out intelligence gathering missions and bombing raids

with virtual impunity. A Soviet advisor who was instrumental in deploying the system, Vladimir Kostrachenkov, claims that the SAAF deliberately bombed civilian targets in southern Angola (p 19). The single most notorious attack was the 1978 raid on Cassinga which served as SWAPO's regional military headquarters as well as a transit camp for refugees. The Soviets, following their clients, regarded the bombing and subsequent capture of the base by paratroopers which resulted in as many as 1 000 casualties, as a "massacre".

This is not the place to revisit this controversy,¹² but Vladimir Varganov reckons that the shot-up parachutes abandoned by the South Africans are testimony to the "resistance offered by the PLAN units" (p 16). This statement obviously contradicts SWAPO assertions that Cassinga was only a refugee centre and housed no military personnel or installations whatsoever. Varganov also mentions that the SAAF inflicted heavy losses on the Cuban forces based in Techamutete that had joined battle to render assistance to SWAPO. This is borne out by the previously unpublished photographs from Moscow's Africa Institute which shows the twisted metal of burnt-out trucks, as well as a destroyed personnel carrier. These images are in stark contrast to those showing Soviet advisors posing with captured SADF vehicles and other materiel dated 1988.

Co-editor Gennady Shubin's position in the ongoing controversy about the outcome of the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale frames the accounts provided by contributors to the volume. In his introduction to the Russian edition which serves as a preface to the volume, he refers to the South African "military defeats of March–June 1988" (p 7). The accounts included here concede that the SADF held the early initiative when they won a tactical victory at the Lomba River where the FAPLA advance on UNITA's headquarters at Mavinga was stopped in its tracks. But the repulse of the SADF's subsequent frontal attacks on well fortified positions in the Tumpo triangle proved

12. I have done so in G. Baines, "A Battle for Perceptions: Revisiting the Cassinga Controversy in Southern Africa", in Philip Dwyer and Lyndall Ryan (eds), *Theatres of Violence: The Massacre, Mass Killing and Atrocity in History* (Berghahn, Oxford and New York, 2012), pp 226–241.

a decisive setback in its bid to capture Cuito Cuanavale. Zhdarkin's diary entry of 9 November 1987 makes it clear that the SADF was not content to destroy Cuito Cuanavale's airstrip but seemed intent on taking the town (p 55). The engagement ended in a military impasse because neither the South African nor the Angolan/Cuban forces had attained their objectives. Shubin contends that the stalemate was broken by Cuban forces that gained air and land superiority (p 191). The Cubans outflanked the SADF forces who had no air cover and advanced on the Namibian border. The translator, Vladimir Korolkov, moots the existence of plans for a Cuban invasion of Namibia (p 186). Whether the South Africans regarded the Cubans as posing a serious threat to the security of their country is an equally moot point. Still, Shubin insists that the South Africans sued for peace and that their withdrawal from Namibia amounted to "a face-saving disengagement" (p 191).

Shubin includes an Appendix titled, "Gauging the Losses and the Outcome", in which he critiques the frequently reproduced figures pertaining to the battle of Cuito Cuanavale provided by retired SADF General Jannie Geldenhuys.¹³ He reckons that Geldenhuys has underestimated the SADF's losses of materiel, especially with respect to aircraft. He also questions whether the Angolan/Cuban casualty figures provided by the SADF are reliable. Equally significantly, he queries why the losses sustained by the SADF's surrogates, UNITA and the SWATF, are not included with SADF personnel. The quibbling over losses is rather a pointless exercise for the outcome of a war cannot simply be determined by statistics. It is worth bearing in mind Clausewitz's dictum that "war is a continuation of policy by other means." In other words, war is a second-order instrument of politics. From this perspective, Shubin is correct to assert that "the battle near Cuito Cuanavale might be classed as a draw, but in reality South Africa lost the war" (p 198 n. 18 and p 199 n. 29). For all intents and purposes, the SADF defended the apartheid system

13. These are located in J. Geldenhuys, *A General's Story: From an Era of War and Peace* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 1995), pp 222–223 and the revised version, *At the Front: A General's Account of South Africa's Border War* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 2009), p 240.

rather than the country's territorial integrity. Hence the loss of power and privilege by the (white) minority amounted to a defeat for the apartheid army.

The apartheid state built a small nuclear arsenal but stopped short of using it against its enemies. But it appears that the SADF was prepared to use chemical weapons against the Angolans and their allies. Zhdarkin notes that FAPLA's 59th Brigade, as well as its Soviet advisers, were affected by poison gas on 29 October 1987 because they had no gas masks (p 49). The observation is made without rancour which suggests that the Soviets themselves had no compunction about employing chemical weapons. Former Chief of the SADF (and later Minister of Defence), Magnus Malan, reckoned that the track records of the Cubans and Soviet Union showed that they were well versed in the use of such weapons. In his memoir, he cites an instance of the use of chemical gas by FAPLA/Cuban troops during the battle of the Lomba River in September 1987, but claims that a change of wind direction rendered it counter-productive.¹⁴ He adds that the SADF only developed non-lethal or incapacitating types of weapons, and that he never authorised the offensive application of chemical weapons. He dismisses as "propaganda" a claim made by Radio Luanda that UNITA used such tactics against FAPLA. But the evidence that emerged about Dr Wouter Basson's chemical and biological programme, codenamed Project Coast, would seem to lend credence to the Soviet charges.

Nonetheless, most of the Soviet advisors speak well of the South Africans and their fighting capacity. They are called "gentlemen" when they issue statements informing the Soviets that they are not the targets of the SAAF's bombing sorties against the Angolans and should depart from the battlefield (p 161). This tactical manoeuvre was apparently aimed at avoiding an international incident but makes nonsense of the apartheid state's rhetoric that they were waging war against "communist enemies". The Soviets, for their part, avoided direct engagement with SADF forces as far as possible but sustained

14. M. Malan, *My Life with the SA Defence Force* (Protea Boekhuis, Pretoria, 2006), p. 269.

some casualties, as well as having personnel taken captive.

The Soviet advisors displayed racism in their treatment and poor opinions of the FAPLA troops. Their comments about the Angolans are unflattering, to say the least. Zhdarkin remarks upon the cowardice of FAPLA officers in the face of the SADF assault on the Lomba River (p 40); the unwillingness of the Angolans to engage in battle (p 123); and their panic when confronting the SADF's special forces known as the Buffalo battalion (p 153). He is not alone in this assessment. Varganov attests to the fact that the Angolans have no stomach for fire fights (p 15). Whilst the Soviets had little more than contempt for FAPLA, they apparently had respect for SWAPO's tenacity. If these comments are representative of the opinions of the Soviet advisors in Angola, it seems that they were better disposed to their enemy than their clients because the former were white. Indeed, Zhdarkin is candid enough to admit that he is better able to identify with white South Africans than he is with black Angolans. Indeed, he felt no compunction to apologise for his racism and yet he was later promoted for performing his "international duty" (p 164). The discourse of the Soviet soldiers was clearly at odds with the credo of socialist solidarity which sought to vanquish colonialism and racism. Like its South African counterpart, the Soviet state's official ideology was bankrupt.

Whereas the Soviet advisors had little in common with their Angolan clients, they speak of warm working relationships and fraternity with the Cubans (p 15). This was presumably not only because some of the Cubans were white. Varganov expressed admiration for Fidel Castro with whom he came into contact when the Cuban leader visited Angola in 1977. He clearly was impressed by Castro's charisma and command of the battle situation. By contrast, he notes that the Soviet leadership was out of touch and issued unrealistic instructions based on poorly informed strategic evaluation of the situation on the ground (p 13).

Other advisors note that the Cubans did not rely on the Angolans for intelligence but conducted their own reconnaissance and information gathering, sometimes preferring to conduct joint

operations with SWAPO rather than FAPLA (p 153). But the advisors fail to mention the tensions that strained Soviet–Cuban relations over the strategy to be followed in the final phase of the war in Angola. Thus it is ironic that many of them were awarded the Cuban medal to the “Heroic Defenders of Cuito Cuanavale”, whilst the Cuban commander, Brig.-Gen. Ochoa who, according to Korolkov, was “responsible for defeating the enemy forces at Cuito Cuanavale” (p 188), was executed. Korolkov repeats the official line that Ochoa was sentenced to death by a military tribunal for drug trafficking, but this reader sensed a degree of disbelief. He possibly shares a widely-held perception that Castro felt threatened by a potential rival for power and had him eliminated. For all Castro’s commitment to international working class solidarity, he was not above sacrificing Cuban conscripts and generals on the altar of political expediency.

Soviet accounts of the Angolan War (translated into English) are few and far between. Cuban and Angolan accounts are equally rare. So this publication is to be welcomed if for no other reason than it affords South Africans a glimpse of how the “enemy” perceived the geopolitical situation in southern Africa and how ordinary Soviet soldiers experienced the late Cold War conflict.

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