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# War in Angola: a Soviet Dimension

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*Vladimir Shubin & Andrei Tokarev*

**This article addresses the political and military relationship between the Soviet Union and Angola between 1961 and 1991. It examines some of the problems between the two countries and is based on newly available archival material and interviews. Soviet policy towards Southern Africa and Angola has been the subject of a lot of academic research in the West, especially during the 'Cold War', yet many aspects remain controversial and contested.**

*Neste artigo que envolve o período a partir 1961 até 1991 são examinados os problemas de relações entre a URSS e o MPLA nos anos da luta anticolonial e, em seguida, os entre a URSS e Angola independente.*

*No período de últimos decénios este tema se tem abordado em numerosas publicações, inclusive as investigações dos institutos académicos, tanto na Rússia como em outros países. Portanto, muitos problemas das relações bilaterais ficam até hoje pouco estudados ou mesmo contestáveis. No presente artigo são examinadas algumas complicações nas relações entre a URSS e o MPLA que tiveram lugar no período em causa (por exemplo, as que foram ligadas à atitude de Moscovo em relação do GRAE). São reflectidos também problemas de cooperação soviético-angolana no campo militar.*

*Os autores do artigo investigaram as relações entre os dois países apoiando-se, em primeiro lugar, nos documentos dos arquivos e nas memórias que recentemente se tornaram acessíveis. Este artigo tem como objectivo preencher algumas 'páginas vagas' da história das relações bilaterais soviético-angolanas.*

## **The USSR & Southern Africa**

Soviet involvement in Angola and its support for the MPLA strained Moscow's relations with the West and with Washington in particular. Some politicians and academics believe that it was the main reason for the end of a so-called 'first detente' between the two 'superpowers'. It is a paradox that of all the liberation movements in Southern Africa it was the MPLA that had a very complex and at times far from rosy relationship with Moscow. The contemporary situation in Angola and the ongoing confrontation between the Luanda government and UNITA cannot be properly assessed without an understanding of the history of the liberation struggle in Southern Africa. But that history, as well as the history of Angola's resistance to Pretoria's aggression cannot be written without reference to Moscow's involvement in it.

Russia interfered militarily, albeit indirectly, in Southern African affairs a century ago. About 200 Russian volunteers, including officers, joined the Boers in their fight against British Imperial forces. Six decades after the end of the Anglo-Boer War the southern part of the African continent became a battlefield again. The first shots came from the forces of liberation on 4 February 1961 during an abortive attempt to storm

prisons in Luanda. It was followed by military struggles waged by the ANC in South Africa, Frelimo in Mozambique, SWAPO in Namibia and ZAPU and ZANU in Zimbabwe.

The USSR had once again to determine its attitude to the war in Southern Africa which is best illustrated by its position on South Africa using newly available archive documents from Moscow. Details of the forthcoming confrontation in South Africa was received in Moscow in October-November 1961 when Moses Kotane, SACP General Secretary and ANC leadership member, came to the Soviet Union together with the SACP Chairman Yusuf Dadoo to attend the CPSU Congress. Here they raised the question of the desired forms of struggle at their meetings with CPSU International Department officials.

The approach of the Soviet's was summarised in the words of the CPSU International Secretary Boris Ponomarev: 'You know better'. Having taken a cautious position on the question of armed struggle, Ponomarev requested and received official permission from the Central Committee to convey the following to the SACP leaders:

*Taking into account the situation [in South Africa] we agree with the opinion expressed by comrades Kotane and Dadoo. At the same time the intention of the SACP to take a course of armed forms of struggle places on the Party great responsibility. It is necessary not to counterpoise one form of struggle to the others but to combine skilfully all these forms. The armed struggle is a struggle of the broad mass of people. It means that in the conditions of the preparation for the armed struggle the political work to win the masses acquires decisive importance. Without consistent political and organisational work among the masses victory is impossible ...*

The position of the CPSU leadership was conveyed to Moses Kotane after Umkhonto we Sizwe had carried out its first actions (Russian State Archive of Modern History [RSAMH]); thus Moscow neither instigated nor agitated for the armed struggle. It respected the decision taken by the South Africans themselves, while warning against over-emphasis on the armed struggle. A similar approach was used towards other liberation movements including the MPLA of Angola. In describing the Soviet attitude and actions in this case we have to rely on the accounts of witnesses and participants in the struggle because there is a lack of accessible documents. The late Petr Evsyukov ('Camarada Pedro'), who for a decade and half had been responsible for contacts with the liberation movements of the Portuguese colonies in the CPSU, recalled in his memoirs that

*the International Department knew about the existence of the MPLA from various sources, mainly from press publications, although Portugal was thoroughly hiding the information on the events in Luanda (Evsyukov, 1993).*

The first representatives of the MPLA, Mario de Andrade, who acted as Chairman while Agostinho Neto stayed in Portugal under police supervision, and Viriato da Cruz, came to Moscow 'in the second half of 1961'. That visit was after the beginning of the armed struggle, and when 'an important decision to begin multi-sided assistance to the organisation was taken' (Evsyukov, 1993). Then some months later, Neto managed to escape from Portugal and 'immediately came to Moscow. The negotiations with him ended quite successfully'.

Like the period of the Anglo-Boer War, Russia/USSR rendered its political support and limited military assistance to the warring side that in its opinion was fighting for a just cause. The second reason for involvement and again similar to the previous

Russian involvement was a rivalry with another powerful country, with Britain in the earlier period and with Moscow's Cold War adversary, the USA in the early 1960s. There is a tendency, especially typical for Western academics and politicians, to look at the armed conflict in Southern Africa (and especially in Angola) mainly through the distorting glasses of 'superpower rivalry' during the 'Cold War'. Thus, Chester Crocker wrote in the preface to his memoirs:

*This book tells the story of peacemaking in Africa the 1980s. It is a record of an American diplomatic strategy which helped us to win the Cold War in the Third World* (Crocker, 1993:17).

But such a 'victory' looks rather bizarre. After all, what happened with Washington's proteges in the region? Who rules Namibia in the contemporary period: SWAPO or the DTA? Who becomes President of Angola: Dos Santos or Savimbi? And who became the first President of democratic South Africa: Mandela or Buthelezi?

Although relations between the USSR and the US did play a role in Moscow's decision-making on Southern Africa (just as the confrontation between Russia and Britain during the Anglo-Boer War), the Soviets did not regard assistance to the liberation movements and African Front Line States as simply waging 'the Cold War'. In the language of those days, their actions were regarded as part of the world 'anti-imperialist struggle', which was waged by 'the national liberation movements', the 'Socialist community' and the 'working class of capitalist countries'.

The history of Soviet relations with the Angolan liberation movements and of the military involvement in that country, as in Africa as a whole, still has to be written. Practically all information on Soviet assistance to the other freedom fighters, even of a purely humanitarian nature, for many years had been 'hidden' from the public in the USSR and abroad. It was not until 1970 that Vassily Solodovnikov, the head of the Soviet delegation to the International conference in solidarity with the peoples of Portuguese colonies, held in Rome, noted in *Pravda*, that Moscow was supplying to the liberation movements 'arms, means of transport and communications, clothes and other goods needed for successful struggle' and that 'military and civilian specialists are being trained in the USSR' (*Pravda*, 7 July 1970).

The assistance was really versatile. 'Camarada Pedro' recalls a fascinating incident. In urgent cases the leadership of the liberation movements who knew his 'nom de guerre' – Pedro Dias – and the number of his 'P.O.B.' could send him a letter by ordinary international mail. A letter once came from Agostinho Neto complaining of the shortage of cartridges for Soviet-made TT pistols asking for them to be sent urgently. 'To confirm his request and to avoid a mistake he enclosed a cartridge in an envelope. This was probably the only case in the history of the postal service' (Evsyukov, 1993).

Financial aid was also provided. In 1973 for example, the MPLA received \$220,000 compared with \$150,000 for PAIGC and \$85,000 for Frelimo (RSAModH, Collection 89, inventory 38, file 40). The money came from the 'International Trade Union Fund for assistance to left workers' organisations, attached to the Romanian Council of Trade Unions' which was established in 1950 on the initiative of the Soviet Party to render material assistance to 'foreign left parties, workers' and public (non-governmental) organisations, which are subjected to persecution and repression'. While there are many stories about 'Kremlin gold', and Moscow played a leading role in the distribution of allocations, originally only half of the contributions to this fund

came from the USSR. The remainder came from China, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Poland, Hungary and the GDR. Bulgaria joined later, in 1958. China withdrew in 1962 after the Sino-Soviet split.

It should be underlined that although the move towards marxism of the leaders of the liberation movement was welcome in Moscow, it was not regarded as a pre-condition for Soviet assistance. As Rostislav Ulyanovsky, Ponomarev's Deputy, and leading Soviet expert on the 'Third World' said to the Soviet delegation to the above-mentioned conference in Rome: 'We don't request ideological loyalty from the liberation movements'.

Moscow's support to the MPLA (and later the government of independent Angola) was especially important because it was often provided during periods when other countries could not or did not want to offer assistance. Moreover, it is our view that the Soviet Union's contribution was not limited to political support and material assistance. It also resulted in the encouragement of non-racialism in Angola and in Southern Africa in general. A special role in it was played by the instructors and staff of the Soviet civilian and military training centres.

## **The Soviet Union & the MPLA**

We can now glimpse at the most crucial periods of Angolan-Soviet relations. While it remains the case that most of the archive documents pertaining to the Soviet position towards Angola are still inaccessible, we can use oral history as well as written memoirs that have begun to appear in Russia during the last decade. Particularly useful are the memoirs written by Karen Brutents, former Deputy Head of the CPSU International Department. He was a member of the Soviet delegation to the MPLA Congress in December 1977 and later became adviser to President Gorbachev. Brutents believes that Angola became:

*one of the key points of rivalry between the USSR and USA in the 'third world'. In the context of its irrational logic Angola occupied a place completely disproportional to its significance and the confrontation there (just as the events in the Horn of Africa) noticeably influenced the Soviet-American relations as a whole and the destinies of the détente (Brutents, 1998:204).*

He continued:

*Our support to the MPLA was dictated not so much by ideology, as [others] often think, but rather by pragmatic considerations: it was the only national movement ... which waged a real struggle against colonisers. A relative role of the ideological linkage is testified by a fact that at a certain moment the CPSU CC Politbureau even took a decision to recognise the MPLA's competitor – FNLA headed by H. Roberto, who was later proved to be connected with the CIA. And only bureaucratic delays and especially the protests of some African leaders and of the Portuguese left prevented its realisation (Brutents, 1998:205).*

'Camarada Pedro' recalled another story that is at odds with the idea that Soviet involvement in Angola was a well thought-out 'pragmatic' decision. Nikita Khrushchev, the CPSU First Secretary and Soviet Prime-Minister, heard about the launch of the GRAE – Holden Roberto's 'government in exile' – while on holiday in the Crimea. He was angry that the USSR had not yet recognised the new government. He bypassed the CPSU International Department (the body which dealt with the MPLA and the liberation struggle in Angola in its various aspects) and the decision

was urgently taken. Moreover, this happened while the MPLA leader Agostinho Neto was visiting Moscow. The Department Deputy Head, Dmitry Shevlyagin was ordered to inform Neto of the recognition on the eve that it was announced. According to Evsyukov who was an eyewitness, Shevlyagin's statement sounded like a death sentence for Neto. Evsyukov who accompanied Neto has remarked:

*On the way to the hotel I was feverishly thinking how to save the situation. I knew well what Holden Roberto represented and understood even better that we had made a mistake, betraying our friends ... The only man who could correct the situation and save the MPLA was Alvaro Cunhal, General Secretary of the Portuguese Communist Party.*

Fortunately, Cunhal was in Moscow and Evsyukov suggested that Neto should call on him immediately and ask him to intervene. 'Camarada Pedro' who spoke perfect Portuguese, went to Cunhal's room and explained the situation 'in two words'.

Cunhal was a hero of anti-fascist struggle in Portugal and enjoyed high prestige in the USSR. So, 'the next day and on the following days no information on our recognition of [Roberto's] government appeared in *Pravda* and it could not appear'. On the contrary, *Pravda* published another article so different in content that the US Embassy phoned the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) to find out who authored it (Evsyukov, 1993).

Moscow's relations with the MPLA deteriorated when Neto signed an agreement with Roberto in late 1972. That agreement marked the creation of the joint front that according to Evsyukov, 'completely disoriented the MPLA members and supporters, as well as us' (Evsyukov, 1993). Neto led the MPLA delegation to Moscow in January 1973 and tried to convince his Soviet interlocutors that the agreement with FNLA meant 'a new stage for the movement'. That stage would open the opportunity for the MPLA to reach 'vital centres of the country' and even if Holden Roberto became the President of the new united front, Neto as Vice-President would control the Secretariat, supplies and military affairs, and that his organisation would 'continue to exist as the MPLA but in alliance with the FNLA' (Shubin, 1973). Neto also spoke about the danger of infiltration of Portuguese agents into the ranks of the MPLA and 'strange behaviour' of some elements that were trying to use 'tribalism and regionalism', apparently hinting at growing tensions within his organisation.

The confusion caused by an alliance with an 'arch-enemy' aggravated differences within the MPLA to such an extent that Army General Victor Kulikov, the Chief of General Staff (a future Marshal of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact Commander-in-Chief) wrote in correspondence to the CPSU Central Committee about the 'actual termination of the liberation struggle in Angola due to a split in the MPLA'. A slightly watered-down version of that view was supported by Ulyanovsky. His memorandum approved by the CPSU Central Committee Secretariat, had a title, 'On the situation in the MPLA leadership' (RSAMH, collection 89, inventory 46, file 104)? In particular, the Soviet Ambassador in Lusaka was instructed to meet both Neto and his rival Daniel Chipenda in an attempt to reach unity in the movement.

By the time of the April 1974 Portuguese revolution, which opened the prospects for Angola's rapid transition to independence, Moscow's relations with its old friend the MPLA were at its lowest ebb. It took the Soviet leadership some months to make a final choice and to resume supporting Neto and his followers. Our evidence here contradicts a position argued recently that claimed:

*The situation in the capital [Luanda] and countryside rapidly deteriorated during the summer and autumn of 1974. With the left increasingly ascendant in Lisbon and Luanda, officials began turning a blind eye to Soviet shipments of small arms to the MPLA. Thus when whites again rioted in November, they were met and armed by African self-defence committees, nominally controlled by the MPLA and armed with more advanced weaponry than before (Zegeye, Dixon & Liebenberg, 1999:395).*

These authors have not indicated their source of information on the arms supplies, but in any case they imply that the Soviets were supplying arms to Angola during 1974; that was far from the case. Moreover, for several months after the Portuguese revolution officials in Moscow remained hesitant regarding a choice between Neto and Chipenda.

At that stage there were two so-called 'revolts' within the ranks of the MPLA against Neto's leadership: the 'Eastern Revolt' led by Chipenda who was based in Zambia, and the 'Active Revolt' in Cabinda and Congo-Brazzaville. According to Paulo Jorge, MPLA Central Committee Secretary and former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Chipenda 'was a person who on MPLA's behalf was in contact with various organisations, including international support organisations and the embassies'; and when the 'Eastern Revolt' took place, they suspended their assistance 'for a while in order to understand what had happened'. '... even the Soviet Union suspended their assistance. We had to explain the situation to them' (Sellstrom, 1999:17).

This task of 'explaining' was made easier following the broad support for the MPLA inside Angola that followed the April 1974 Portuguese revolution. The Soviet attitude became much more positive towards the end of 1974. In December, Moscow received an MPLA military delegation headed by Henrique (Iko) Carreira (who after the proclamation of independence became first Angolan Minister of Defence). He spoke about the MPLA's political hegemony in Angola but admitted its 'weakness from the military point of view'. Carreira also emphasised MPLA's 'strategic and tactical alliance' with the Movement of Armed Forces (MFA), which was in power in Portugal at that stage (Shubin, 1974).

Several 'fact-finding' and later solidarity visits by the Soviets to Angola also helped. These trips included one ostensibly 'to study the local educational system' made by Navy Captain Alexey Dubenko (future Admiral and the first Soviet military attaché in Angola). Another important Soviet visit was a delegation of the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee, headed by Alexander Dzassokhov.<sup>1</sup> He was an eyewitness to the triumphal return of Agostinho Neto to Luanda on 4 February 1975. In the last days of April 1975 'Camarada Pedro' followed them together with Gennady Yanaev, then Chairman of the Committee of Soviet Youth Organisations - the same Yanaev who took over from Mikhail Gorbachev as Acting President for three days during a so-called 'coup' in Moscow in August 1991.

Moscow supported the Alvor agreements of January 1975 between MPLA, FNLA and UNITA but resumed supplies to the MPLA against the background of the growing assistance to the movements rivals from the West, South Africa, Zaire and, for a certain period, from China. In particular, a core of the brigade, manned by the MPLA activists, underwent a crash course of training in Perevalnoe, in the Crimea ('Ngongo', 2000).

The most crucial moment in Soviet-Angolan relations was on the eve of Angola's independence. Georgy Kornienko, who was the First Deputy Foreign Minister, wrote in his memoirs:

*In the Angolan episode of the 'Cold War' like in the majority of its episodes ... Washington said 'A', but in this case as well, Moscow did not refrain for a long time from saying 'B' (Kornienko, 1995:166).*

He believed that the worsening of Soviet-American relations was shaped by Moscow's perceived influence in Angola and explains the failure to advance the talks on strategic arms and why Brezhnev's visit to the USA was postponed and then did not take place at all. It is likely however, as the former Head of the Southern African Department at the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vladilen Vasev has noted, that if the issue of complaint for Washington was not Angola, the US would have found another excuse for 'cooling off' relations with Moscow (Interview with Vasev, 15 January 2001).

Kornienko commented on the 'sad consequences of the two approaches of Soviet foreign policy - state and ideological - and the institutional confusion related to it' (Kornienko, 1995:166). According to him, after the independence of Angola 'the civil war, provoked by US actions, began to flare up', the Soviet MFA together with the Ministry of Defence and the KGB prepared a proposal, approved 'by and large' by the CPSU Politbureau. This proposed giving the MPLA all kind of political support and 'certain material support', but not to get involved in the civil war in Angola 'in the military sphere'. Yet some days later the CPSU International Department, headed by Ponomarev, having secured the signatures of Marshal Grechko (the Defence Minister) and the KGB Chairman Andropov, managed to get Gromyko's support to meet MPLA's limited requests for arms supplies.

The fallacy is indisputable, so popular among the Western leaders and mass-media, that Moscow asked Cuba to send its troops to Angola. Both Kornienko and his boss Andrei Gromyko, as well as Grechko and Andropov actually discovered that Cuban combat troops were on the way to Angola from a message of the Soviet Ambassador to Guinea. He had informed Moscow about forthcoming plans for Cuban planes to land in Conakry. It is important to note, however, that Cuba informed Moscow earlier about the first stage of their involvement. Petr Manchka, then the Head of African Section at the CPSU Headquarters informed SWAPO President Sam Nujoma on the forthcoming arrival of 500 Cuban instructors in Angola (Shubin, 1976).

There were only two Soviet citizens in Luanda on the eve of Angola's independence: they were the *Pravda* correspondent Oleg Ignatyev and TASS correspondent Igor Uvarov. The first group of Soviet military instructors did not arrive in Luanda until 16 November. The group headed by Captain Evgeny Lyashenko left Moscow on October 31 by a scheduled Aeroflot flight and next day arrived in Brazzaville. It had a specific technical and purely defensive mission - to train Angolans in the use of 'Strela' ('Arrow') portable anti-aircraft missile launchers. Zaire, which supported FNLA, had obtained Mirages from France and the MPLA leadership anticipated air raids on Luanda. The group was transferred to Point-Noir within seven days and on 16 November it was joined by a larger group of instructors headed by Colonel Vassily Trofimenko. Five days after the proclamation of Angola's independence, over 40 Soviet military specialists arrived in Luanda (Tokarev, 2001).

Soviet involvement in Angola produced many 'unsung heroes'. The historians still have to recall the name of the Deputy Commander of Air Transport Wing from the town of Ivanovo. On the eve of the Angola's independence he risked his life and the life of his crew to airlift urgently two Katyusha rocket launchers from Brazzaville to Point-Noir, where the runway was unfit for the heavy Antonov transport aircraft.



These rocket launchers were then further moved by a Cuban ship to Luanda and played a critical role in rebuffing the attack of Mobutu/FNLA troops against Luanda at the time.

Soviet assistance to the MPLA government was crucial to its success in the 'second war of liberation' 1975 to 1976. However, the relations between Luanda and Moscow soon faced a new test. In May 1977 some forces within the MPLA, headed by Nito Alves and using leftist slogans, arranged an abortive coup d'état. And, when Neto came to Moscow on an official visit in August, he surprised his Soviet interlocutors with a sudden statement. According to Karen Brutents, at the start of the Angolan President's meeting with Leonid Brezhnev and other Soviet leaders,

*after traditional common phrases Neto suddenly turned to the theme of the recent military mutiny in Luanda and, ignoring diplomatic nuances, said: 'Here I came, because such a thing – mutiny – happened, and I wanted to find out from you personally, has Moscow taken part in a conspiracy against me or not? Because, as I have been informed, many of your people have been involved' (Brutents, 1998:494).*

The situation was aggravated because Brezhnev, who was already partly incapacitated, did not immediately reject the accusation. Instead, he began to read from a prepared text regarding 'the good situation' in the USSR and 'the expected excellent harvest'. It looked as if the Soviets were avoiding an answer to Neto's accusation and therefore confirmed his fears. It was only later that day that a Soviet official announced an 'addendum' that rejected Neto's accusation and confirmed that Moscow had not shifted its support from Neto. It seems that the rumours of Soviet involvement in 'Alves's coup' was deliberately spread by Western circles as well as forces within Angola who questioned close links with Moscow.

Moscow's relations with Luanda survived this episode but the Soviets still suffered some 'casualties'. According to Brutents, 'Angolans ... claimed that some of our advisers were involved in the intrigues of the Angolan military against Neto as a weak and hesitating man, etc. As the result the Soviet military representative in Luanda, N. Dubenko was recalled' (Brutents, 1998:296). It was not only the military that took part in 'Alves's coup'. Alongside Dubenko's first name was Alexey, and it looks like he became a scapegoat, although after his return to Moscow until his untimely death he continued his service in the Ministry of Defence, dealing with the liberation movements.

## **The Soviet Union in Angola**

According to General Roberto Leal Ramos Monteiro 'Ngongo', Angola's current Ambassador in Moscow, over 6,000 Soviets came to Angola 'to teach in military schools and academies and to train our regular units'. Over 1,000 Soviet military visited Angola for 'shorter periods of time' while 6,965 Angolans underwent military training in the Soviet Union (Ngongo, 2001). Figures, provided by the Moscow Institute of Military History are even higher: 'up to 1 January 1991, 10,985 Soviet military advisors and specialists visited Angola, including 107 generals and admirals, 7,211 officers, 1,083 warrant-officers and midshipmen, 2,116 sergeants, petty officers and privates and 468 civilian employees of the Soviet Army and Navy'; 6,985 Angolans were trained in the Soviet/Russian 'military educational institutions' up to 1 January 1995 (Rossiya (SSSR) v lokalnyh voynah, 2000:104)

Most of the Soviet military in Angola served with the Angolan government army, but some with the ANC, SWAPO and, earlier, ZAPU. Their role has been grossly distorted by many Western and South African authors either because of their ignorance or reliance on poor intelligence sources. Thus, a British academic (and a former editor of the *African Confidential*) Stephen Ellis and his co-author, a renegade from the ANC and SACP who used an ambitious (and deceiving) pen-name 'Sechaba' ('People') claimed in their book 'Comrades against Apartheid' that in September 1987 the Angolan government offensive against the SADF-backed UNITA was 'supervised in part by a Soviet General Konstantin Shaganovitch' (Ellis and Sechaba, 1992:183). The fact is that there had earlier been a Soviet Chief Military Adviser in Angola whose family name was similar – Shakhnovich, although his first name was Vassily and not Konstantin. The General left Angola for the USSR in 1980 and before long died in Moscow. One of Shakhnovich's successors was Lieutenant-General (from 1983, Colonel-General) Konstantin Kurochkin, First Deputy Commander of the Soviet Paratroopers. Ellis and 'Sechaba', it seems, managed to merge someone that was dead with someone alive. Kurochkin himself left Luanda in 1985, though he paid several short visits later to Luanda (interview with Kurochkin 25 September 2001).

The British journalist Fred Bridgland went even further than Ellis and Sechaba. He took 'General Shaganovitch's offensive' as the title for a whole section of his book describing military actions in Angola. Moreover, the non-existent 'Konstantin Shaganovitch', according to Bridgland, was 'a known chemical warfare expert', and this is used to substantiate the claim that the Angolan Brigade that faced the SADF had 'chemical weapons in its armoury' (Bridgland, 1990:62). It was on the contrary however, as we shall see later; it was South African troops that used chemical weapons in Angola.

At the same time Bridgland (and his friends) grossly miscalculated the number of the Soviet military in Angola: 'Intelligence agencies estimated that Shaganovitch had about 950 fellow Soviets in command and training posts in Angola' (Bridgland, 1990:17), while the man in charge of them, General Kurochkin said that the strength of 'the Soviet advisory apparatus' he headed was 'about 2,000 people' (Kurochkin, 2001:2).

The Soviets suffered casualties in Southern Africa, just as the Russian volunteers many decades earlier. According to the Angolan Ambassador, 15 Soviet military (including aircraft crew members) had been killed in Angola in the period up to 1991, and according to Russian military historians, by the same date 51 people were killed or died and 10 were wounded. There were, in particular, many heroic and tragic moments experienced by the Soviet military during the 'battle of Cuito-Cuanavale'.

## **Cuito-Cuanavale**

The history of the 'battle at Cuito-Cuanavale' and its effect on the further developments in the region remains controversial. In the opinion of Chester Crocker who headed African affairs in the US State Department during Reagan's administration, the decisive positive shift in the process of negotiations on the political settlement took place before the major battle started. Fidel Castro, on the other hand, declared that the history of Africa would be divided into two parts: before and after Cuito-Cuanavale. For his part former a top SADF commander claimed in his memoirs that his forces had no intention to take Cuito-Cuanavale whatsoever. Further research is needed, and to start with here are extracts from the diary of a Soviet veteran, who

had been serving at Cuito-Cuanavale for several months in 1987-1988 (Jeronimo, 10 October 1987):

**10 October 1987:** *'... On October 1 'assessors' [Soviet advisors] of the 21<sup>st</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> brigade returned from the operation on the river Lomba. There ... a misfortune happened. They were 'covered' by a shell from a high-velocity South African gun. As a result Oleg Snitko, an interpreter, suffered a blown away arm and a broken leg. He died in 36 hours. Others were unlucky as well: four were wounded and shell-shocked ...*

**27 November 1987:** *Today is hardly different from the previous days. [Our brigade is] under fire, the neighbouring brigades were under fire too.*

*There is a dead silence on the Soviet radio about Angola...*

*The enemy continues firing at Cuito. At 6 p.m. a salvo was delivered by [rocket launchers] Kentrons ... I could not get through to Cuito for a long time. Finally they informed me that shells exploded right on the [Soviet military] mission territory. They haven't yet informed about the results.*

**28 November 1987:** *All the night and morning there was a tiring, exhausting silence: not a single shot, no sound of an engine, nothing. Because of it we couldn't get a sleep for a long time. Besides, we were worried what happened in Cuito.*

*At 6.00 we found out that Colonel A. Gorb was killed, an aged man, very quiet, kind and polite ... Everybody respectfully called him 'Dyadko' ['Uncle' in Ukrainian or Belorussian]. He has spent over a year in Angola.*

The same veteran implies that there was a love hate relationship between the South Africans and the Soviets. He noted that:

*South Africans are remarkable gentlemen ... I believe firing on our camp was not envisaged in their plans.*

*Why? Because before March 11 [1988, a day of severe fighting at Cuito-Cuanavale] they sent us an ultimatum: 'Soviets, leave Cuito-Cuanavale, we don't want to touch you'.*

*The leaflets were in English: 'Soviets, we don't want to touch you'. The Angolans brought those leaflets to us: 'Here it is written in English, we don't understand ...'*

*We informed Luanda about it. The order came from Luanda: 'You, over there, take care of your security. Don't leave the Angolan brigade, but take care of your security ...'* (Interview with Jeronimo, 28 October 2000).

However, some actions of the SADF could hardly be regarded as 'gentlemen's behaviour':

**29 October 1987:** *At 14. 00 we received awful news. At 13.10 the enemy fired on a nearby 59<sup>th</sup> Brigade with chemical shells containing a poisonous substance. As a result many were poisoned, four are unconscious, the Brigade Commander bleeds when he coughs. The Soviet advisers in this brigade were affected as well. The wind blew to their side, and all of them are complain about very severe headaches and nausea.*

*This news made us very worried, the matter is that we don't have even the most obsolete gas masks.*

The debacle of South Africa and UNITA at Cuito-Cuanavale, and the advance of Cuban, Angolan and SWAPO forces towards the Namibian border, created favourable conditions for the completion of talks on the so-called Angolan-Namibian settlement. Cuito-Cuanavale led to acceptable conditions for Luanda and Havana and for signing the December 1988 New York agreements. The Soviet contribution to the success of these agreements was made mostly by Ambassador Vasev and, at a later stage, by Deputy Foreign Minister Anatoly Adamishin, whose memoirs, a 'rejoinder' to his American counterpart Chester Crocker's 'High Noon in Southern Africa: Making Peace in a Rough Neighborhood', will be soon published in Moscow.

According to Adamishin, the US 'programme-maximum' of Washington at the peace talks included not only the withdrawal of South Africans and Cubans from Angola, and independence for Namibia, but 'an additional prize' as well of 'bringing Savimbi to power or at least to share power'. The US nevertheless had to 'lower the stakes'.

*To us it was easier in a certain sense. We always proceeded from the point, that what is suitable for our friends will be suitable for us as well. We're not for anything beyond it and didn't ask (Adamishin, forthcoming:150).*

Although Adamishin is critical of some aspects of the Soviet actions in Southern Africa, he also writes:

*If we had not come to the assistance of the MPLA, seven thousand miles from our borders, who would have benefited from it? Little doubt, it would have been the RSA ... What would have been further developments in the region, if the racist RSA had grabbed Angola in addition to Namibia? However many years more would her domination by force over the region have continued? How many years more would apartheid have survived?*

*... the RSA would not have left Angola of its own will had it not faced the dilemma: to wage a large-scale war against the Cubans, to declare total mobilisation, to risk a lot of white blood or to search for a compromise ...*

*It is clear that the Cuban factor was not the only one, the [Pretoria] government had constantly to look back at the situation in the country. But the Cuban military pressure brought about the equilibrium on the battlefield, which was a forerunner of the talks that followed. However the Cuban role became efficient due to our support, including first of all, the supplies of arms (Adamishin, forthcoming:151-152).*

Some scholars speak and write about the Soviet 'withdrawal' from Angola, dating it from the New York agreements. However, Moscow's military assistance continued for at least two and a half years, albeit in a diminishing volume. Its end almost coincided with the 'dissolution' of the USSR's, after the conclusion of the Bicesse Accord on the political settlement, about to be resumed, this time from the government of Russia, when on the one hand, Savimbi's refusal to honour his obligations became evident and, on the other hand, when, in the mid-1990s Russia's foreign policy became motivated by her national interest and not by a desire to please the West at the expense of old friends in other parts of the world.

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## Endnote

1. Dzassokhov later became a member of the CPSU Politbureau and now is President of the Republic of Northern Ossetia - Alania in the Caucasus.

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