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Peter Polack, *The Last Hot Battle of the Cold War: South Africa vs. Cuba in the Angolan Civil War*. Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2013. Pp. 232. ISBN 978-1-61200-195-1.

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On the morning of 10 December 1987, President Ronald Reagan and his Soviet counterpart Mikhail Gorbachev met in the Oval Office as part of a series of landmark summits marking a dramatic thaw in the Cold War. The two leaders deliberated plans to scale back their nuclear arsenals and defuse regional tensions between their allied (or client) states. They discussed, for instance, Afghanistan, Central America, communist Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia, Arab-Israeli relations, and the war between Iran and Iraq. Absent from their agenda was Africa, except perhaps as an afterthought over dessert raised by Gorbachev during a luncheon meeting.<sup>1</sup> Such has been the historic plight of Africa, the global doormat of various corporate and governmental powers—a victim of the slave trade, extractive avarice, and Cold War rivalries.

On that same December day, war raged in southwestern Africa as proxies of the Soviet Union or the United States fought to control southeastern Angola at the battle of Cuito Cuanavale. For six months, Soviet- and Cuban-backed Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (FAPLA) fighters battled American supported National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) rebels and their South African allies. This was the second largest battle fought on African soil since El Alamein in 1942 (22). In *The Last Hot Battle of the Cold War*, Peter Polack examines in detail this neglected Cold War battle, which both defined superpower rivalry on the African continent and ushered in the end of an era of indirect war between the Washington and Moscow.

Polack, a criminal lawyer, is an avid scholar of Cuba's role in Africa's Cold War-era conflicts. He has dedicated years of his life to the study of the war in Angola, a fact clearly evident in the depth and detail of his research. Despite a dearth of primary source materials from the Cuban and Angolan governments, Polack has crafted a fluent and captivating narrative of a pivotal battle that will advance the sparse existing scholarship on the events that took place between late 1987 and early 1988.

Polack does not aim to provide a comprehensive study of the geopolitical significance of southern Africa in the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> Instead, he explains the meaning of the battle of Cuito Cuanavale in both the narrower context of Angola's war for independence from Portugal and the broader frameworks of Cold War competition in Africa and the efforts of Moscow and Havana to propagate wars of national liberation in the 1960s and 1970s. Africa was ripe for the picking as it emerged from more than a century of colonial exploitation and oppression.

The book's micro-historical approach concentrates attention on the effects of a singular battle upon the various involved parties. Cuba's initial foray into southern Africa in November 1975 (Operation Carlotta) was mounted to provide amphibious assault support for the Marxist-Leninist People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) against the right-wing National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA). Polack reveals the challenges that confronted the Cubans in these early days of Angola's splintered fight for independence; challenges very like those the United States had encountered in the countryside of South Vietnam in the previous decade. Drawing on the experience of a Cuban veteran of Operation Carlotta, Polack writes:

Ernesto's company was tasked with establishing a defensive perimeter around [a military post near Luanda]. This required an almost daily reconnaissance patrol of outlying villages. Ernesto observed, "We saw great

1. *The National Security Archive*, "The INF Treaty and the Washington Summit," 7-10 Dec 1987 - [www.miwsr.com/rd/1418.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1418.htm).

2. For which, see William Minter, *Apartheid's Contras: An Inquiry into the Roots of War in Angola and Mozambique* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Zed Books, 1994), and Vladimir G. Shubin, *The Hot 'Cold War': The USSR in Southern Africa* (London: Pluto Pr, 2008).

needs of the people. They were very poor and without education. We tried to help them. We gave them our food and much needed medical attention by allowing them to come into our fortified camps. Ironically, the people we helped were the same ones who would help the enemy attack us. They knew our troop strength, our movements and because they lived so close to the camp they became valuable informers to the enemy, they were easily bribed.” (32)

Polack sees the Cuban interference in southern Africa as the product of Fidel Castro’s own ambitions and not any larger directive from Moscow. Angola represented an ideal opportunity for Castro to promote his doctrine of the “internationalist proletariat.” In the end, the operation was a debacle, which a dejected Ernesto describes as “an absurd concept ... where the poor of Cuba needed to help other poor people” (35). Yet, the Cubans learned several important lessons they would later apply in the battle of Cuito Cuanavale.

Unfortunately, many of book’s chapters are congested with ledgers of casualties, profiles of key personalities on all sides, and too detailed descriptions of the sundry armaments used by South Africans, Cubans, and Angolans.<sup>3</sup> All this detracts from an otherwise absorbing narrative of a seesaw engagement in which FAPLA forces gained strategic ground only to lose it as South African infantry and air support pushed back.

One SADF [South African Defence Force] unit thought it came under attack by MiGs that flew over so low that the South African soldiers could feel the heat of the jets’ exhaust. Fortunately for the South Africans the MiGs did not attack them; perhaps the MiGs were flying too low and too fast to notice them. At the Lomba River, the disciplined and more experienced SADF troops found that a frequent FAPLA reaction to artillery fire was to panic on their radio net. This served to assist the South African fire control as frightened FAPLA officers reported artillery shell strikes at set distances and direction from their position. (116)

In general, however, Polack glosses over South Africa’s role in Angola’s struggle. Although staunchly anti-communist, Pieter Botha’s government had become anathema as the world mobilized against its Apartheid policies. South Africa thus joined the fray in Angola without benefit of Western arms and economic aid; it acted as much to secure its own frontiers as to further any specific ideological goal. Pretoria deployed ground and air units to assist UNITA in halting the advance of the Cuban- and Soviet-backed FAPLA. Had the MPLA and FAPLA prevailed at Cuito Cuanavale, the country would soon have been united under a socialist banner. This would have given the neighboring South West African People’s Organization (SWAPO) rebels easy access to bases from which to attack the former German colony of South-West Africa (present-day Namibia), which South Africa had been administering since the end of World War I. The actions South Africa took in Angola were certainly part of the larger Cold War struggles of the time, but they were motivated chiefly by a desire to preserve its own territorial integrity.

No one book can be all things to all readers. Military histories, in particular, attract a variety of readers for many different reasons. While not the definitive history of Angola’s place in the Cold War,<sup>4</sup> *The Last Hot Battle of the Cold War* does offer a detailed examination of the battle of Cuito Cuanavale that will assist military historians concerned to understand the value of specific armaments in determining the outcomes of proxy wars in the Cold War era.

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3. Everything from Soviet MiG-23 fighter planes, MiG-23BN fighter-bombers, T-55 tanks, and BMP-1 amphibious assault vehicles to South African Ratel armored fighting vehicles, Oliphant tanks, Mirage fighter jets, G5 and (motorized) G6 155mm howitzers.

4. That distinction belongs to Edward George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965-1991: From Che Guevara to Cuito Cuanavale* (NY: Routledge, 2005).