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Cuban-Angolan Cooperation and the Construction of a State

Bachelor's thesis in Historie - Bachelorstudium

Supervisor: John Kwadwo Osei-Tutu

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1. Introduction

In the latter half of the 20th century, as Cold War superpower antagonism and the nuclear threat dominated public discourse, large parts of the global South experienced a wave of political instability and violence as the former colonial empires in Europe relinquished their vast overseas territories and disintegrated. The Portuguese Empire was no exception, and its territories in Africa quickly became embroiled in internal conflicts. One of the longest-lasting postcolonial conflicts in this region occurred in Angola, a country with an already long and tragic history of violence.

In this paper, we wish to explore the history and effects of foreign aid on the development and results of the Angolan civil war. Specifically, our goal is to evaluate Cuban military and civil aid provided to the MPLA, and the influence it had on the ultimate victory and persistence of the MPLA state into the 21st century, as the party continues to rule Angola at the time of writing. In clear terms, our research question is: *What influence did Cuban military and civil aid have on the survival and success of the MPLA?* To answer this, we will identify and investigate the different forms of aid provided by Cuba to Angola, before discussing and evaluating their impact in the short- and long-term perspective.

The fact that Angola experienced violent instability from 1961-2002 makes it difficult, at least from a local perspective, to separate between the discrete phases of the conflict. As our question concerns the extent, role, and influence of Cuban military and civil aid on the prevailing MPLA state, our area of focus will be the major foreign involvement period between 1975 and 1991. Although Namibian independence and the end of South African apartheid are tightly interlinked with this conflict in Angola, a full investigation of this relationship is beyond the scope of our discussion, and will only be mentioned for context.

Furthermore, we will briefly cover the period following Cuban withdrawal in 1991, until the cessation of UNITA/MPLA hostilities in 2002. It is, however, necessary to provide some historical context on the era leading up to these years, and we will do so in section 2.

1.1 Methodology

Searching for sources for this analysis has presented several issues. The major problem is access to major primary sources in the form of archive documents; relevant archives in Cuba and Angola are heavily restricted, and it is relatively rare to be granted access by the respective governments. Additionally, South African archive material from the late apartheid period may have been destroyed.¹ Another issue is the language barrier. Documents related to our question are partially found in Spanish, Portuguese, Afrikaans and English, and we are only able to use the latter, and second-hand translations.

To mitigate the lack of primary sources, we have located multiple secondary sources written by researchers who have a high degree of familiarity with the various classified documents in Havana, Luanda, and Pretoria. These researchers include Christine Hatzky, Piero Gleijeses, Edward George, and Isaac H. Saney. Hatzky has done extensive work on educational cooperation between Cuba and Angola, and has been granted access to archives from the Angolan ministry of education, and we will refer heavily to her work in section 5. Gleijeses' access to the otherwise strictly guarded archives in Havana, combined with his extensive interview material, make his works on the topic a valuable contribution to the literature; but as Chris Saunders points out in his review article on (among others) Gleijeses' book *Visions of Freedom*, this also results in a "[...] partial account, in his case from a Cuban perspective," being presented, and thus his conclusions should be read along with other works.²

We therefore also make use of Edward George's work on Cuban military involvement in Angola, as he presents a more neutral viewpoint and has accounted for the last phase of the civil war in impressive detail. Additionally, Isaac H. Saney's brilliant Ph.D. dissertation on the Cuban role in the battle of Cuito Cuanavale and its aftermath will be used. In addition to interview material and private sources, George utilizes archive material from Pretoria, Havana and Luanda, while Saney was only able to access documents from the former two, placing particular focus on the South African archives.³

¹ Saney 2014: 13-14

² Saunders 2014: 1365

³ George 2005: 1-3; Saney 2014: 11-15

Additionally, the 2017 article *Global Ideologies, Local Politics: The Cold War as Seen from Central Angola* by Justin Pearce, in which he argues that the conflict between UNITA and the MPLA was characterized more by attempts to appear state-like than political ideology, serves as a foundation for our own argument, and is the reason why we have chosen to draw focus away from Cold War geopolitics and diplomacy, although it is impossible to avoid completely.⁴ This will be returned to in greater detail in section 7.

Some English-language newspaper material from Western reporters is also used, but the factual information in these articles, particularly numbers and statistics, is often of a dubious nature, and their use is limited for this reason.

2. Angola, the MPLA, and the lead-up to independence

By the end of the 15th century, many European powers had entered a dramatic period of overseas territorial expansion in every direction, sending the world into a colonial era that would not end for another 500 years. The direct consequences of this period are still felt today, in everything from the names and borders of states, to wealth distribution, equality, and languages spoken. “Like most African countries,” writes political scientist and linguist Edward George, “Angola is a false construct, and was pieced together in the late nineteenth century from a string of Portuguese colonies along the south-west African coast [...]”.⁵

Although the colonies would not formally ‘belong’ to the Portuguese Empire until centuries later, the presence of European missionaries and merchants allowed Portugal to exert large influence over the area, most notably supplying slave labor to plantations in other Portuguese colonies, like Brazil, and to plantations elsewhere in Africa.⁶ As Philippe Le Billon puts it in the introduction to his article on the Angolan political economy: “Since the integration of Angola into the Western economy five hundred years ago, the demands placed on its wealth have been associated with repression and suffering”.⁷

⁴ Pearce 2017: 16

⁵ George 2005: 6

⁶ Hatzky 2015: 32-33

⁷ Le Billon 2001: 55

2.1 Colonial history

Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Cape Verde, and the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe all became part of the vast Portuguese Empire. When the supremely profitable colony of Brazil declared independence in 1822, the Portuguese turned towards Africa as their new source of income, including Angola and the coastal areas around the capital of Luanda.⁸

The brutality of the colonial regime only increased through the 19th and 20th centuries, with the infamous Berlin Conference of 1885 establishing the borders of the area we today know as Angola, granting the Portuguese the ‘legal’ right to subjugate the entire territory, when previously it had only controlled a relatively narrow strip along the Atlantic coast.⁹ Despite repeated attempts to encourage settlement by the Portuguese authorities, of both the post-1910 Republic and the fascist Estado Novo (New State) regime that replaced it, the colony remained sparsely settled by ethnic Portuguese. At the end of World War II, however, Angola proved to be rich in a variety of natural resources, perhaps most notably oil, which triggered a dramatic increase in the number of white settlers. Before 1910, the number of Portuguese in Angola was below 12 000. By the time Angola achieved its independence, that number had increased to 300 000. This was in part because Salazar’s Estado Novo was willing to invest in the, otherwise lacking, Angolan infrastructure to facilitate settlement.¹⁰ The fact that Angola turned out to be so profitable led to the Salazar regime further tightening its grip on the territory, effectively suppressing organized resistance and any calls for independence.¹¹ This would, evidently, not last forever, as a wave of nationalist sentiment spread throughout Africa in the last half of the 20th century, a wave that no colonial empire would survive intact.

2.2 Liberation movements

By the time Angola was plunged into a full-on colonial war in 1961, two major Angolan guerrilla movements were fighting the Portuguese colonizers: the **UPA** (*União das Populações de Angola*) and the **MPLA** (*Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*). As can be gleaned from their names, the nationalist wave provided the foundation of both

⁸ Hatzky 2015: 32

⁹ Ibid: 32-33

¹⁰ Hatzky 2015: 34-36

¹¹ George 2005: 8

organizations' political doctrines, and they were first and foremost (at least nominally) fighting for independence from Portugal. Only the latter, the MPLA, can be said to have had a consistent ideology in the classical sense though, having partially grown out of the Angolan Communist Party.¹² Spearheaded by Agostinho Neto, the MPLA leadership proclaimed themselves Marxist-Leninist, and effectively projected this ideological commitment in search of aid from, and diplomatic links with, the countries of the Eastern or Soviet 'camp', in addition to Non-Aligned countries such as Yugoslavia and, most central to our analysis, Cuba. Although the particulars of the MPLA's political doctrine arguably strays from Marxism-Leninism, such a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

The details of the decade-long struggle against the Portuguese, although interesting and perhaps under-studied, are not directly relevant to our discussion, and will not be given much attention. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that by the spring of 1974, the UPA had changed its name to **FNLA** (*Frente Nacional para a Libertação de Angola*), and held a relatively strong military position, controlling much of Northern Angola. The MPLA, on the other hand, was on the brink of collapse following two successive party splits, and Neto was desperately searching for new benefactors.¹³ Additionally, a new organization, **UNITA** (*União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola*), had been founded by former UPA member Jonas Savimbi. Although UNITA played a minor role in the early stages of the conflict, it would become central to the end of South African and Cuban involvement, which we will discuss in greater detail in a later section.¹⁴

2.3 Trouble in Lisbon

In April of 1974 the world was taken by surprise when a coup d'état toppled the Caetano (previously Salazar) regime in Lisbon, triggering what became known as the Carnation Revolution. Behind the coup was the **MFA** (*Movimento das Forças Armadas*), a group of mostly left-leaning military officers, some of which were veterans of the colonial wars, who were keen on ending the conflicts in Africa and dismantling the Empire. The MFA went through a leadership change, replacing the reform-oriented General Spínola with the more

¹² Cann 2011: 201-202

¹³ George 2005: 52-53

¹⁴ Ibid: 23

radical General Costa Gomes, and the process of decolonization began mere months later.¹⁵ Independence was granted first to Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique under relatively peaceful conditions in September 1974 and June 1975, respectively.¹⁶ Angola was a different story.

Unlike their counterparts in Guiné [Guinea-Bissau] and Mozambique which had merged to form a united front against the Portuguese (forming the PAIGC and FRELIMO respectively), the Angolan movements had resisted all calls for unity, and after thirteen years of fighting were more bitterly divided than ever.¹⁷

The change in Portuguese leadership led to ceasefires being negotiated with each Angolan independence movement in October 1974, but peace would only last one month before fighting again broke out between the movements in Luanda.¹⁸ At this point, foreign powers such as the USA, South Africa, China, and the Soviet Union had become increasingly involved in the conflict through aid and military instructors, but Cuba would still not be significantly involved in the conflict for another six months.¹⁹ In early January 1975, another agreement between the movements was signed in Mombasa, and some days later the Alvor accords were signed in Alvor, Portugal, which stated that a transitional power-sharing government would rule while a constitution was drafted and elections held, until 11 November 1975, when independence was to be granted.²⁰

2.4 South Africa gets involved

To understand why the Cubans entered the conflict, it is important to briefly provide some context on Angola's immediate 'neighborhood', particularly South Africa and Namibia, which was often referred to as South West Africa (SWA) prior to its eventual independence. Isaac Saney summarizes it well in his Ph.D. thesis:

While geographically separate from the Republic of South Africa, Namibia was treated by Pretoria as a *de facto* fifth province. South Africa had occupied Namibia, a former German colony, since 1915. In 1920, the occupation was formalized under a mandate granted by the League of Nations. However, in 1966, the UN

¹⁵ George 2005: 50, 54

¹⁶ Hatzky 2015: 49-50

¹⁷ George 2005: 52

¹⁸ Ibid: 55

¹⁹ Ibid: 53

²⁰ Ibid: 56

revoked South Africa's mandate, and the UN General Assembly passed several resolutions declaring South Africa's occupation illegal.²¹

The ruled illegality of the occupation did not seem to affect the South African Government's (SAG) policy toward Namibia, and it continued its rule over the territory despite UN resolutions. The most central of these, and one that would bear large significance for the war in Angola, was UNSC Resolution 435, adopted in September 1978:

[...]which called for the withdrawal of South African troops, the end of the illegal occupation of Namibia and an UN-supervised transition period followed by free elections leading to Namibian independence.²²

With the aid of Washington, Pretoria managed to delay the implementation of Resolution 435 for ten years. The problem, in Pretoria's view, was not the independence of Namibia, but the South West African People's Organization (SWAPO), a guerrilla force with Marxist tendencies and good relations with the MPLA, fighting for independence from South Africa. SWAPO enjoyed great popularity among Namibia's nonwhite population, and the SAG was (rightly) convinced that it would win any free election.²³ This threatened the SAG's military buffer zone of states friendly to the regime, which was already under pressure from multiple fronts as former colonies and white-ruled states along its borders were buckling under the weight of anti-colonial struggles. In response, "[...] Pretoria adopted an interventionist policy and undertook covert operations in Angola, Rhodesia and Mozambique."²⁴ Angola was of particular significance to the South Africans, because the MPLA allowed SWAPO to maintain bases in the south of the country, from which SWAPO guerrillas could infiltrate into northern Namibia. Additionally, the banned South African political party African National Congress (ANC), perhaps most known as the party of Nelson Mandela, had important guerrilla bases in Angola.²⁵ In the eyes of South Africa, they had, at least, two good reasons to involve themselves in Angola.

²¹ Saney 2014: 251

²² Ibid: 251

²³ Gleijeses 2013: 11

²⁴ Saney 2014: 30

²⁵ Gleijeses 2013: 186

2.5 Alvor fails, South Africa invades, and Cuba responds

The Alvor Agreements, however hopeful, proved to be another failure, and the peace would last less than two months.²⁶ According to George, “[...] street-fighting broke out less than twenty-four hours after its [the Transitional Government] inauguration.”²⁷ For the first time, the Portuguese army did not involve themselves in the clashes, and the white settlers began fleeing Angola *en masse*, no longer protected from the violence.²⁸ This exodus would have a fundamental role in shaping the ways in which the Cubans took part.

Through the spring and summer of 1975, the situation in Angola quickly deteriorated. Foreign powers on every side had increased material support to their preferred movement, and the MPLA grew more powerful as the Soviet Union began providing military aid in March.²⁹ The arrival of Cuban military experts in July, sent to assess the situation on the ground, marked the true beginning of Cuban involvement.³⁰ For six months, the Cuban government had more or less ignored the MPLA’s requests for support.³¹ The reports submitted by the Cuban military experts in 1975 eventually led to a 480-person strong military mission, spread across four bases, with the main concentration of troops in the Cabinda exclave.³² The MPLA managed to keep its control over most of the provincial capitals throughout the autumn, empowered by Soviet weapons and Cuban specialists, but the threat was increasing from both the north and south. The FNLA had a strong position in the areas immediately north of Luanda.³³ The South African Defense Force (SADF), which had occupied areas around a South African hydroelectric plant in the very south of Angola since early August, were instructed to begin invading northward in October, and was advancing rapidly.³⁴ The South African advance, coupled with the FNLA threat from the north, was on its way to completely overwhelming the MPLA when Cuba finally responded to Neto’s pleas for support. This came in the form of Operation Carlota on November 4, 1975, a large

²⁶ Hatzky 2015: 51

²⁷ George 2005: 59

²⁸ Hatzky 2015: 51

²⁹ George 2005: 60

³⁰ Hatzky 2015: 52

³¹ Gleijeses 2002: 256

³² George 2005: 65-66

³³ *Ibid*: 55

³⁴ *Ibid*: 68

military presence that would come to characterize the civil war, and the object of our investigation.³⁵

Beyond early clashes with Cuban and FAPLA (*Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angola*), the MPLA's armed wing, the FNLA only played a minor role in the continuation of the conflict, and were largely irrelevant to Cuban involvement after 1977.³⁶ We will therefore give little attention to this movement going forward. As the conflict dragged on into the 1980s, the internal struggle for power was mainly one between the MPLA and UNITA, and for this reason they will become our focus.

3. The nature of Cuban aid

Although Cuba and the MPLA had established diplomatic ties in the late 1950s, Havana did not give much material support to the movement throughout the colonial war, only supplying a limited number of military instructors and training some MPLA guerrillas in Cuba.³⁷ This changed when South Africa launched an invasion of Angola in October of 1975, when Havana finally answered the MPLA's requests for assistance, with Operation Carlota.

The Soviet Union and its role in aid to Angola and Cuba will not receive much attention in this discussion. This is not to imply that it was unimportant in any sense, but a discussion on the Soviet aid program and its effects would be tangential to our research question, both due to the relatively small scale of the program, and because authors like Gleijeses have convincingly argued that Cuba acted largely as an independent actor rather than a Soviet proxy.³⁸ It is, for our purposes, sufficient to note that the Soviet Union was almost solely responsible for arming both the MPLA and Cuba, and that Soviet military advisors were highly influential in shaping FAPLA military strategy, but regular Soviet troops were not sent to Angola to partake in the fighting.³⁹

³⁵ Gleijeses 2002: 305

³⁶ Gleijeses 2013: 68

³⁷ George 2005: 22

³⁸ Gleijeses 2013: 29

³⁹ Ibid: 70-72

After the initiation of Operation Carlota, the Cuban aid program to Angola grew rapidly with the addition of a civil aid mission in 1976. Military and civil aid will be discussed separately in sections 4 and 5.

4. Military aid

The most obvious and visible component of Cuban aid to Angola is military support, both in terms of soldiers, equipment, and military advisors deployed to train the MPLA's FAPLA troops. For this section, we will rely mainly on accounts from the works of Gleijeses and George, as well as the Ph.D. dissertation *From Soweto to Cuito Cuanavale* by Isaac H. Saney, which presents an exhaustive account of Cuban military involvement in Angola, with particular focus on the battle for Cuito Cuanavale and its aftermath. We will now provide an overview of Cuban military involvement between 1975 and 1991.

4.1 Early involvement

Beginning with Operation Carlota in November 1975, Cuban military presence in Angola was continuous until a full withdrawal beginning in 1988 was completed in 1991, but its scale fluctuated throughout the conflict. Six months after the beginning of Carlota, the number of troops had grown to 36 000, before dropping below 24 000 the following year.⁴⁰ A few years later, the number began growing again, eventually peaking at 55 000 in 1988, before the Cuban forces began their withdrawal following the New York peace agreements in December of that year.⁴¹

Central to understanding the conflict in Angola, and how and why the Cubans, acted is the fact that the Cubans viewed their end of the conflict mainly as a war against South Africa, and not UNITA. Havana had been reluctant to send the MPLA military support beyond instructors while it was fighting the FNLA and UNITA, and this only changed when the SADF launched Operation Savannah in October of 1975. Throughout the conflict, the Cuban military effort was focused on countering South African aggression. This is not to say that Cuban troops never engaged UNITA troops; Cubans notably participated in the LCB (Luta

⁴⁰ Gleijeses 2013: 215

⁴¹ Ibid: 503

Contra Bandidos) operations directed at UNITA guerrillas in 1976 and 1977, but according to Edward George, the “[...] vast majority of forces were not involved in the LCB”⁴², and Cuban troops did not participate in the two major operations against UNITA in Mavinga, to the dismay of the Soviets.⁴³ Thus, the scale of Cuba’s involvement in the war against UNITA was quite limited, and the purpose of the resource-intensive Cuban defensive line approximately 250km north of the Namibian border was largely to repel or limit an attack from South Africa.⁴⁴

According to the records Gleijeses has consulted, the Cubans expressed their opinions on what the division of labor between FAPLA and Cuban forces should be quite strongly, as can be seen in a letter from Fidel Castro to Angolan president Dos Santos, who had taken over the MPLA leadership after Neto’s death in 1979, on September 20, 1983:

[...] I am not going to talk about mistakes in your economic policy. . . . I want to focus on military matters. . . . For years, you have adopted the wrong strategy: you have concentrated your efforts on preparing the regular brigades of the FAPLA to repel a foreign attack, but these troops do not participate in the war against the bandits [UNITA]. This strategy completely overlooks the immense effort made by Cuba: our troops, stationed along the Namibe-Lubango-Matala-Cubango-Menongue line, are there to defend Angola from a large-scale South African invasion. [...] For a long time we have been insisting in vain that all the brigades of the FAPLA, regular brigades and light brigades, . . . must concentrate on the war against the bandits.⁴⁵

The first of the major Cuban military operations in Angola was, as previously mentioned, Operation Carlota, which began following the South African invasion in October of 1975, combined with the increasing threats from Zaïre-supported FNLA in the north, both of whom were marching on Luanda. When Havana intervened on behalf of the MPLA government on November 5, the situation changed rapidly as heavy arms, equipment, and 36 000 Cuban soldiers poured into the country over the next six months.⁴⁶ The invasion ordered by South Africa was successfully repulsed, and the last SADF troops withdrew from southern Angola in late March 1976, an event which no doubt influenced the apparent legitimacy of the MPLA regime.⁴⁷

⁴² George 2005: 119

⁴³ Gleijeses 2013: 412

⁴⁴ Ibid: 377

⁴⁵ Castro in Gleijeses 2013: 228-229

⁴⁶ Gleijeses 2006: 98

⁴⁷ Saney 2014: 80

4.2 The Cubans remain

A major issue remained: South Africa still controlled Namibia, and its well-equipped army could roam throughout the country as it pleased. The border shared by Angola and Namibia is long, and it was clear that the MPLA, which at the time had an army so lackluster that Gleijeses even refuses to call it an “army”, could not adequately defend this border on its own.⁴⁸ It does not seem that Havana intended for the Cuban troops to remain in Angola beyond Operation Carlota, at least initially.⁴⁹ After the South African troops withdrew to Namibia in March 1976, the Cuban leadership had changed their minds. Cuban military instructors were to remain indefinitely to train the MPLA’s armed forces so it could defend itself, but the plan was to withdraw the regular Cuban troops gradually from 1976 to 1978, a plan Neto accepted.⁵⁰

That withdrawal never came to fruition. To South Africa, an MPLA-controlled Angola was a direct threat to the apartheid regime, in part by harboring both SWAPO and ANC guerrillas, and the failure of Operation Savannah in 1976 was not enough to change its view. It may even have reinforced it.⁵¹

On May 4th, 1978, South African bombs and paratroopers descended upon a SWAPO refugee camp, near the town of Cassinga in southern Angola, massacring more than 600 Namibians. Sixteen Cuban troops were also killed.⁵² The attack on Cassinga, codenamed “Operation Reindeer”, had few consequences for South Africa on the international stage, but it marked a turning point for Cuban troop movement in Angola.⁵³ It became clear that the SADF had not given up on its ambitions in Angola, and that it still posed a serious threat to the stability and integrity of the MPLA state. Indeed, in 1979, the South African Government codified its policy toward Angola with two papers, the first of which “[...] established the long-term goal of overthrowing the MPLA and instituting South African control of the country”.⁵⁴ The original Cuban withdrawal plan from 1976 was scrapped when Luanda requested further

⁴⁸ Gleijeses 2013: 34

⁴⁹ George 2005: 116

⁵⁰ Gleijeses 2013: 35

⁵¹ Saney 2014: 81

⁵² Gleijeses 2013: 60

⁵³ Ibid: 117

⁵⁴ Saney 2014: 81

reinforcements, a request which Havana accepted, and the number of Cubans in Angola began rising steadily.⁵⁵ According to George, citing an interview with a former Cuban officer who served in Angola, there may have been up to 80 000 Cuban troops in the country by 1983, but these numbers are far from certain, due to the heavily restricted archives in Havana, but 50 000 seems to be a more cited number.⁵⁶ The increased SADF and UNITA attacks, and the resulting Cuban troop buildup, would culminate in Operation Maniobra XXXI Aniversario, launched on November 15, 1987.⁵⁷

4.3 Cuito Cuanavale and the push to Namibia

As the FAPLA forces were poised to defeat UNITA in their offensive against Mavinga in Southern Angola in the autumn of 1987, the SADF invaded in support of UNITA, pushing FAPLA back to the small town of Cuito Cuanavale, roughly 270km north of the Namibian border.⁵⁸ The ensuing battle lasted from December of 1987 to late March 1988, and is considered by Gleijeses and Saney, among others, to be of principal importance to the survival of the MPLA state, although George is not in agreement on this point, viewing it more as a myth.⁵⁹ Saney argues that “The resources expended [on the battle] attest to the overriding importance attached to the struggle by Pretoria, on one side, and Luanda and Havana, on the other”.⁶⁰ For the first month of the battle, however, the only Cubans involved in the defense of the town were military advisers and technicians, before a tank and artillery battalion were dispatched on January 14th, arriving on the 21st.⁶¹ Shortly after, the Cubans were given command of the forces at Cuito under General Cintra Frias.⁶² On March 6th, Frias’ command was extended to all Cuban and Angolan forces in southern Angola.⁶³ Without going into further detail, the repeated South African attempts at taking Cuito Cuanavale between December 1987 and late March 1988 all ultimately failed, and the town was successfully defended.⁶⁴ To the Cubans, however, the fight was not over. Saney writes:

⁵⁵ Gleijeses 2013: 63

⁵⁶ George 2005: 120

⁵⁷ Gleijeses 2013: 431-432

⁵⁸ Saney 2014: 131

⁵⁹ Gleijeses 2013: 467; Saney 2014: 28; George 2005: 234-235

⁶⁰ Saney 2014: 131

⁶¹ Ibid: 142

⁶² Ibid: 143

⁶³ Ibid: 184

⁶⁴ Gleijeses 2013: 425

When Havana assumed overall command of the Angolan and Cuban forces, it had a broader strategic goal beyond simply the defense of Cuito Cuanavale. When the 15 November 1988 decision to send troops to Angola was made, Castro and the FAR general staff also decided that an opportunity existed to deliver a serious defeat to the SADF.⁶⁵

The defense of Cuito was only half of Castro's plan. When the Cubans felt confident the town would not fall, their focus shifted.⁶⁶ While the SADF had been busy with their attempts at taking Cuito, massive reinforcements from Havana were deployed to south-western Angola, including "[...] not only the bulk of its armaments but also its most experienced and highly trained troops".⁶⁷ The next step was a gradual advance southward from the defensive line to the Namibian border in order to push the SADF out of southern Angola entirely.⁶⁸

Since the outset of the civil war in 1975, the complete air superiority over the Namibian border region enjoyed by the South African air force (SAAF) had forced the Cubans to keep the brunt of their forces at the defensive line 250km north of the Namibian border.⁶⁹ This changed in the summer of 1988 with the completion of two new airstrips in southern Angola, swiftly extended for fighter aircraft, accompanied by a powerful radar/anti-aircraft system, "[...] effectively bringing South African air superiority to an end".⁷⁰ With the threat of SAAF attacks practically eliminated, combined regiments of Cuban, Angolan and SWAPO troops began advancing steadily towards the Namibian border.⁷¹ After a dramatic battle near the hydroelectric facilities of Cunene on June 27th, only 13km north of the long Namibian border, which left more than 300 FAPLA/Cuban and at least 11 SADF troops dead, hostilities practically ceased, and "[...] for the next two months, they [the SADF] did little more than monitor the build-up of Cuban forces in the region".⁷² The negotiations gradually progressed, and with the signing of the Geneva Protocol on August 10th, South Africa announced its full withdrawal from Angola, and it was completed on August 30th.⁷³ The war between Cuba and South Africa was, for all intents and purposes, over.

⁶⁵ Saney 2014: 181

⁶⁶ George 2005: 236

⁶⁷ Saney 2014: 183

⁶⁸ Gleijeses 2013: 370

⁶⁹ Ibid: 176

⁷⁰ George 2005: 237

⁷¹ Gleijeses 2013: 428

⁷² George 2005: 245-246

⁷³ Ibid: 250

4.4 Negotiations and agreements

Negotiations between Cuba, Angola and South Africa eventually resulted in The Tripartite Agreements of 1988, signed in New York on December 22nd, marking the end of direct foreign involvement in Angola. In summary, the agreements signed between Cuba, Angola and South Africa had three major consequences: (1) the implementation of UNSC Resolution 435, granting Namibia independence and announcing elections; (2) the northward redeployment and eventual full withdrawal of all Cuban troops from Angola, and (3) the end of Cuban and South African support to both the MPLA and UNITA, respectively.⁷⁴ The latter is worded rather vaguely in terms of “non-interference” (although its implications are clear), and Angola additionally agreed to end its support to the ANC, which according to Gleijeses was “[...] of little consequence” in comparison to the end of South African aid to UNITA.⁷⁵

Several historians, Gleijeses included, have argued that Cuba played no small part in how these negotiations turned out. Besides participating actively with diplomatic delegations in the last phases of the negotiations, the Cubans had changed the military situation in Angola in such a way that South Africa no longer had much power to bargain. Gleijeses claims quite boldly, but not without foundation:

Had the Cubans not saved Cuito Cuanavale, Pretoria would have been in a position to dictate terms to a dejected Angolan government. Had the Cubans not launched an offensive in the southwest toward the Namibian border, their voice at Cairo would have been stripped of its ability to threaten.⁷⁶

George seems to be in agreement, arguing that the (sometimes deliberate) timing of clashes between Angolan/Cuban/SWAPO forces and the SADF in the spring and summer of 1988 had significant influence on the outcome of the peace talks.⁷⁷ In one way, the agreements were a success for Cuba and Angola: the sovereignty of the People’s Republic of Angola, under the rule of the MPLA, had been affirmed internationally. Cuba could withdraw its troops, Namibia had gained its independence, and South Africa would end its military and economic support of UNITA. But this did not mean peace in Angola. The agreements made

⁷⁴ UN, 1988: UNSCR 435

⁷⁵ Gleijeses 2013: 490

⁷⁶ Ibid: 467

⁷⁷ George 2005: 243, 248

no mention of US aid to UNITA, or an internal settlement between it and the MPLA, and violence would soon resume.

4.5 Angola after Cuba

Before moving on to discussing civil aid, we will briefly outline the major political events that occurred in Angola in the decade following Cuban withdrawal.

In accordance with the Tripartite agreements, the Cubans began withdrawing their forces from Angola soon after the accords were signed. The withdrawal also meant that the more than 2000 Cuban aid workers still in Angola would have to depart, as their safety from UNITA was no longer guaranteed, and technical assistance officially came to an end a few days after withdrawal was completed in the summer of 1991. The MPLA was more or less on its own. It struck a ceasefire deal with UNITA in May of 1991, agreeing to hold elections under UN supervision the following year, and the country briefly enjoyed relative peace. When the election came, however, disputes over the legitimacy of its results led to the reignition of armed conflict between the two parties. The war continued, and it would only end ten years later in February of 2002, with the death of UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi.

5. Civil aid

Moving on from the military aspect of Cuban involvement in Angola, we will now shift our focus to civil engagement. By the outbreak of the Civil War in 1975, the vast majority of the Angolan professional class had long since disappeared with the departure of the Portuguese, and Angola's social services needed extensive support, both in terms of materials and staff, to continue functioning. This section is subdivided by the three main professional branches that constituted the Cuban civil aid mission: (1) education, (2) medicine, and (3) technical. In order to gain more detailed understanding of what tasks were actually undertaken by the civil mission, we have chosen to account for these branches separately in some detail, the main focus being on education, as literature on the medical and technical branches is more scant.

In 1975, foreign aid was welcomed by the struggling MPLA; it controlled Luanda and other key areas, but it was destabilized and weakened by the colonial war and internal rifts.

Additionally, it was under threat from both the SADF and the FNLA. When the Cubans intervened with Operation Carlota, and the military threat was largely eliminated by spring of 1976, the MPLA could begin its task of state-building in order to extend and consolidate its status as the legitimate state of Angola, and Cuban aid became a central element of this project.

As a result of the young age of the Cuban state, the aid strategy in Angola was informed by the revolutionary government's own experiences with rapidly extending social services in a largely underdeveloped country at home. Cuba had experienced a similar mass flight of the professional class after its revolution, particularly in the medical field, and the government applied the lessons they had learned in restaffing and developing its public services in Angola. Christine Hatzky summarizes some of these experiences:

[...] Cuba had successfully introduced a literacy campaign, and it could now claim experience in establishing a catch-up education program. This policy seemed equally applicable to the situation in which Angola now found itself. The Cuban health system was also tuned to the specific needs of countries in the Southern Hemisphere. Cuban doctors were familiar with tropical diseases (e.g., malaria, yellow fever), and they had also proven themselves able to organize universal health care and broad preventative measures, despite an acute lack of medicine, equipment, and infrastructure. Then there was the Cuban construction industry. It specialized in building light, prefabricated buildings that, when adapted to the tropical climate, could provide fast and simple housing for a large number of people [...] planning failures meant that the Cuban agricultural industry was not running as efficiently as it should. Nevertheless, it was producing tropical crops [...]. The same crops were grown in Angola, which meant that Cuban agricultural experts could at least provide the necessary know-how.⁷⁸

These parallels undoubtedly gave the Cubans some advantages in the field, but they are impossible to quantify or confirm beyond indications from documentary evidence. They were more significant as “[...] above all pragmatic reasons” for the MPLA to choose Cuba as their main cooperation partner in the first place.⁷⁹ Cuba had recent experience in state-building and a surplus of professionals, and Angola had neither.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Hatzky 2015: 76

⁷⁹ Ibid: 73

⁸⁰ George 2005: 144

5.1 Education

An important element of Cuban aid to Angola, and one Cuban officials seemed to be particularly proud of, was educational cooperation in its various forms. At home, Cuba had begun an extraordinary effort to eradicate illiteracy and increase quality of education in the previous decades, and it sought to export that newfound knowledge and experience to other developing countries. The knowledgeable historian Christine Hatzky has written extensively on the subject of educational cooperation between Cuba and Angola, and due to her access to Angolan Ministry of Education records we will largely rely on her work for our analysis in this section.⁸¹ In her book *Cubans in Angola: South-South Cooperation and Transfer of Knowledge, 1976-1991*, she approaches the relationship between Cuba and Angola (mostly) outside of the Cold War perspective, focusing heavily on education. Although exact figures are near impossible to determine without further access to restricted archives, the data Hatzky presents puts the number of civilians engaged in Angola, throughout the period of 1976-1991, at between 40 000 and 50 000.⁸² How many of those were related to education is difficult to determine, and annual, detailed figures are virtually absent. Moreover, she rejects the term “intervention” when speaking about the civilian Cuban presence in Angola, characterizing the relationship as a bilateral cooperation rather than a one-sided action, which the word can often connote.⁸³

For a small nation like Cuba, less than two decades into its own revolution and under heavy international embargo, the involvement in Angola was a massive undertaking. Although Cuba did maintain military and civil missions in numerous African countries, as well as granting scholarships for studies in Cuba from said countries, Cuban engagement in Angola represented by far its largest ‘internationalist mission’, both in military and civilian terms.⁸⁴ This turned out to be a costly venture for the government in Havana, which had previously prided itself on providing its technical assistance cost-free, and a program was set up to compensate the Cuban government for the assistance. The exact figures are murky, but it seems as if the Angolans did pay the Cubans to some extent for the assistance, except for some years when nothing was paid for. When they did pay, they paid at least half of it in hard

⁸¹ Hatzky 2015: 151

⁸² Ibid: 154

⁸³ Ibid: 27

⁸⁴ Ibid: 155

currency, but many other details remain unknown.⁸⁵ After 1984, they may not have paid Cuba for “humanitarian aid” at all.⁸⁶

5.1.1 Early stages of cooperation

The first Cuban teachers arrived in Luanda soon after the initial troop deployment, but the first formalized educational project did not come into effect until February 1976, when a pilot civil aid project (tightly coordinated with the military) was launched in Cabinda, an Angolan enclave situated on the coast between Congo-Brazzaville and Zaïre (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), one of the few areas under MPLA control at the beginning of the war. The initial project in Cabinda was soon expanded, and the legal framework for further educational cooperation was formalized in July of 1976.⁸⁷ The form it had taken was no accident:

The Cabinda pilot project embodied the political and military strategy with which the Cuban government intended to support the MPLA in the future. This strategy involved defending the territory while simultaneously deploying small groups of civil specialists to support the construction of a network of state-run social services [...] This would strengthen the confidence of the population in the new MPLA government. The strategy drew on the focus strategy of the Cuban guerrilla movement, and with it the Cuban government expected to keep the deployment of civilians to a minimum.⁸⁸

The educational cooperation entailed far more than the dispatch of Cuban teachers and advisors to Angola: it was a heavily institutionalized, controlled and coordinated venture, that grew to include *cooperantes* from a wide range of professions. Although the initial plans for educational aid from 1976 were mostly limited to teacher training, they were soon expanded significantly by a succession of bilateral agreements between the two countries in the following years, largely initiated by the MPLA government.⁸⁹ The resulting institutionalized cooperation can be roughly split into two main categories; (1) educational aid within Angola, and (2) scholarships for Angolan students in Cuba. The latter generally took place on Isla de

⁸⁵ Hatzky 2015: 182

⁸⁶ George 2005: 150

⁸⁷ Hatzky 2015: 158-159

⁸⁸ Ibid: 158-161

⁸⁹ Ibid: 157

la Juventud on its southern coast. The first was by far the most expansive in terms of sheer numbers, but the latter was far from insignificant.

The first phase of educational cooperation mainly entailed advisors that were to “[...] support their Angolan colleagues but not to replace them”,⁹⁰ although this did not always prove possible. They were deployed to practically all branches and levels of the MED (Angolan Ministry of Education), and their numbers increased in late 1977, before decreasing again following criticism and requests from Angolan education planners to scale back the program.⁹¹

5.1.2 Teachers in Angola and the end of “help for self-help”

If the Cubans had any illusions about limiting the number of civil aid workers dispatched, they were quickly shattered. The previously mentioned mass exodus of whites from Angola had left it with an almost complete lack of trained workers, which threatened the structural integrity of the MPLA government.⁹² Reports from the Cuban education specialists sent to Angola and increasing requests from Neto’s government, made it clear that the social services in the country were on the brink of collapse, and it required extensive technical support to stay functional. The “help for self-help” plan proved inadequate for this task, and thus, it could no longer be limited to advisors.

In 1977, it was determined that Cuban personnel should fill the empty teacher positions left by the Portuguese, and the number of Cuban advisors in the MED began decreasing.⁹³ In exchange, university professors, teachers, and student teachers began pouring into the Angolan education system.

Between 1977 and 1982, Cuban university professors and lecturers played a major role in re-establishing teaching and research at the University of Angola. They were responsible for developing syllabuses, for the resumption of teaching, and for all the technical and administrative tasks involved in reconstructing the faculties.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Hatzky 2015: 196

⁹¹ Ibid: 197

⁹² Gleijeses 2013: 79

⁹³ Hatzky 2015: 163

⁹⁴ Ibid: 199

By late 1980, the number of Cuban teaching personnel had risen to 1168.⁹⁵ As the language barrier proved more difficult to overcome than initially thought, “[...] the Angolan MED determined that the Cuban teachers should not teach below the sixth grade level”, and for the same reason, the subjects they taught were also limited.⁹⁶ George claims that it took “an average of two months before the majority of their students fully understood them”.⁹⁷ The Cuban government responded positively to Luanda’s requests throughout the first half of the conflict, and the number of Cuban teachers in Angola steadily increased until 1982.⁹⁸

As their numbers continued rising, it became clear that Cuba did not have enough educated teachers to be sufficient for both countries. Thus, over 2000 students were engaged as schoolteachers in Angola between 1978 and 1986, under the auspices of Cuban lecturers.⁹⁹ Unfortunately, these students usually had little to no experience with their subjects or teaching as a whole, and the program was not well received in Angola.¹⁰⁰

5.1.3 Isla de la Juventud

From 1977 onwards, more than 10 000 Angolan students graduated from purpose-built boarding schools on Isla de la Juventud and other schools in Cuba.¹⁰¹ The total number of attending students, including those who did not graduate, is unknown, but likely higher. An agreement reached between the two governments in the spring of 1977 established the terms of the sizeable project.

In this agreement, Cuba undertook to build and equip schools, to supply Cuban teaching staff, and to provide food, accommodation, and medical care for the pupils and students.¹⁰²

The agreement was not entirely one-sided in this matter, as the Angolan Ministry of Education also contributed “[...] by providing and financing Angolan teachers and a

⁹⁵ Hatzky 2015: 201

⁹⁶ Ibid: 200

⁹⁷ George 2005: 160

⁹⁸ Hatzky 2015: 163

⁹⁹ Ibid: 202

¹⁰⁰ Ibid: 203

¹⁰¹ Ibid: 156

¹⁰² Ibid: 207

scholarship program”¹⁰³. The structure and contents of classes and curriculum were determined according to the overarching social goals of the MPLA by the respective ministries of education in Cuba and Angola.¹⁰⁴ Similar offers of purpose-built boarding schools and scholarships were extended to numerous other developing countries and liberation movements, notably SWAPO and ANC, who both accepted.¹⁰⁵ Out of the four schools that were opened on the island in October, 1977, two were dedicated to Angolans with a capacity of 600 each, and it was quickly filled by 800 Angolan pupils arriving in November.¹⁰⁶ The program continued expanding, and “[...] by 1987, there were 4,000 Angolans studying there [Isla de la Juventud], representing one-quarter of all foreign students”.¹⁰⁷

Although the school administration and many of the teachers were Cuban, their curriculum, as mentioned, was specifically tailored to their nationality, with Angolan teachers responsible for teaching Portuguese, geography and history in order to “[...] promote a feeling of national identity among pupils from the same country”.¹⁰⁸ To this end, the educational cooperation with Cuba served a social purpose to the MPLA. After completing 9th grade, the students with the best average grades would be offered scholarships for further pre-university and university education in Cuba, but what they could study was limited, depending “[...] on Angolan requirements at a given time and were adjusted during consultations between the Cuban and Angolan Ministries of Education”.¹⁰⁹

As with the educational program in Angola itself, the students at Isla de la Juventud were not universally pleased; they were far from home for long periods, the Angolan ministry of education had little oversight, and discipline at the Cuban schools was strict. The students often expressed their discontent through strikes and protests, and only then would delegations be sent from the ministry of education in Angola to the island.¹¹⁰ Compared to those who were educated by Cuban teachers in Angola, the number of Angolans who graduated from

¹⁰³ Hatzky 2015: 208

¹⁰⁴ Ibid: 208-209

¹⁰⁵ Gleijeses 2013: 340, 494

¹⁰⁶ Hatzky 2015: 208

¹⁰⁷ George 2005: 160

¹⁰⁸ Hatzky 2015: 210

¹⁰⁹ Ibid: 208

¹¹⁰ Ibid: 212

schools on Isla de la Juventud is relatively low. Notably, many of those who did graduate “[...] occupy positions in politics, government administration, and the military” – in other words, those who were lucky enough to be offered higher education now enjoy a privileged position in Angolan society.¹¹¹

When the Tripartite Accords were signed, ending foreign involvement in Angola, Cuba was descending into a serious economic crisis. Costs had to be cut, and withdrawal came at a convenient time for Havana in this sense. As with the military aid, the expensive civilian aid programs in Angola and elsewhere were concluded, and, although Cuba could no longer dispatch teachers to Angola or grant new scholarships, it allowed all foreign students that were already in Cuba to complete their studies.¹¹²

5.2 Medicine

After their revolution in 1959, the Cuban government had placed great emphasis on expanding the island’s medical coverage by opening clinics and educating swathes of doctors. Although Cuban policy on foreign aid changed after 1991, it has continued providing medical missions to a row of underdeveloped and conflict-stricken areas, well into the 21st century. The first of these missions was dispatched to another African country, Algeria, in 1963.¹¹³ By the time the Cubans entered Angola, there were civilian missions in three other African countries, and more were to follow.¹¹⁴ According to George, the medical brigades were the first civilians of the Cuban aid mission to arrive in Angola, and the situation was dire:

Following independence, there was only one doctor per 100 000 Angolans, and the few hospitals were understaffed, lacked medicines and overflowed with the sick and wounded. Large medical teams were posted to Luanda’s University and Prenda hospitals, and clinics were opened across Angola to provide basic treatment to people living in remote areas.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Hatzky 2015: 212

¹¹² Gleijeses 2013: 494

¹¹³ Gleijeses 2002: 36

¹¹⁴ Gleijeses 2013: 22

¹¹⁵ George 2015: 158

As Hatzky points out, civilians from a broad range of countries, including ones in the Western bloc, participated in medical missions to Angola during the conflict due to broader international cooperation in medicine than in other areas of civil aid.¹¹⁶ The Cuban medical presence was still the most significant, and Edward George summarizes some of the reasons for this:

[...] the average Cuban cost only a quarter of a similarly qualified doctor from the World Health Organisation (WHO). But Cubans were also prepared to endure more basic living conditions [...] and were more sociable, easy-going and more racially tolerant than their Soviet and East German comrades. Most Cubans could communicate in faltering ‘Portuñol’, and their innate ability to improvise when equipment or supplies were lacking (a skill learned in Cuba) was a major bonus in Angola where blackouts and shortages were a daily occurrence. While it is true that Cuban doctors were in Angola to look after thousands of Cuban soldiers, their contribution to Angola’s fledgling health service should not be understated.¹¹⁷

The exact scope of the overall medical mission is, again, difficult to confirm. According to Gleijeses, the number of Cuban doctors in Angola doubled between 1976 and 1979 – from 112 to 336 – but he does not go into further detail on other personnel related to the medical mission, such as nurses, dentists, and technicians.¹¹⁸ Although figures are hard to trace, Gleijeses presents documentary evidence in the form of interviews and newspaper material that indicate the importance of the medical presence. For instance, he mentions an interview with a priest who recalls only “[...] one Angolan doctor and a Red Cross mission were left [in Huambo]”, a major Angolan city, when a Cuban medical team arrived in March of 1976, and continued by saying “The Cuban medical teams play a key role throughout the country”.¹¹⁹ In 1985, the journalist Richard Dowden, reporting for the London Times seemed to view Cuban civil engagement in Angola in a positive light, saying that “The Cubans have achieved much in Angola, providing large numbers of doctors and putting up the few buildings constructed in the last few years”.¹²⁰ Around this time, as the military situation once again deteriorated, civilian aid workers were largely confined to larger cities and provincial capitals, inevitably lowering access to healthcare in the peripheral regions.¹²¹ In February of 1989, as the Cuban troops were in the process of withdrawing, James Brooke reported on the situation in Angola in the New York Times:

¹¹⁶ Hatzky 2015: 104-105

¹¹⁷ George 2005: 159

¹¹⁸ Gleijeses 2013: 84

¹¹⁹ Ibid: 79

¹²⁰ Dowden in Gleijeses [1985] 2013: 327

¹²¹ Gleijeses 2013: 332

For many Angolans, the most welcome Cuban presence here is the Cuban medical mission. This year, Cuba provides Angola with 323 doctors, or 41 percent of the total in Government-controlled areas. With a population of nine million, Angola has only 230 Angolan doctors. According to the United Nations Children’s fund, 30 percent of Angolans have access to health services, one of the lowest such rates in the world.¹²²

By June of 1991, the remaining medical brigades had left Angola. As mentioned, Cuba could no longer economically sustain foreign civil missions by the early 1990s, and, judging by the sources we have discussed here, the Angolan healthcare system was left quite fragile as internal violence continued.

5.3 Technical aid

The last central element of civil aid that we will cover in detail here is often referred to as the “technical” mission or program. This name is vague, perhaps intentionally, reflecting the wide variety of professions it encompassed, but its main task was that of construction and engineering projects.¹²³ During its colonial era, the territories today known as Angola received little attention in terms of infrastructure development. Even when settlement increased in the early 20th century and the Portuguese state began providing funding for economic development, it was mainly concentrated along the coast and in major cities, with the notable exception of the Benguela railroad.¹²⁴ What little infrastructure there was at the beginning of the civil war in 1975 had suffered from the more than decade-long colonial war that preceded it. As the Cubans moved in to assist the MPLA in consolidating its military and state power, it quickly became clear that reliable routes for logistics and buildings for military purposes, education, medicine and housing were necessary.

¹²² Brooke 1989

¹²³ George 2005: 158

¹²⁴ Hatzky 2015: 48

5.3.1 Early efforts in infrastructure

The technical mission consisted of Cubans from a variety of professional backgrounds. Dominant among them were carpenters, engineers, and other construction-related professionals, but the category also seems to have served a “catch-all” purpose for the skilled *cooperantes* that weren’t directly related to medicine or education; agricultural experts, financial advisors, economists, and administrators could also be found within this branch.¹²⁵

The South Africans withdrew completely from Angolan territory after the defeat of Operation Savannah by the end of March 1976, but the “Second Liberation War” (November 1975-March 1976) had left critical infrastructure heavily damaged, and Angola was still suffering from the mass flight of its professional class. The MPLA was left with few options and turned to foreign aid for technical assistance in its reconstruction effort, first and foremost from Cuba. The technical branch is an early example of this.

In January 1977, the first construction teams arrived in Angola, and over the next five years they built fifty new bridges and 2,000 houses in Luanda [...] They also reopened several thousand miles of road and partially reconnected the electricity and telephone networks. [...] Havana planned to expand the programme threefold, but [...] the plans were never realised, and around 2,000 Cuban construction workers remained in Angola for the rest of the 1980s. The quality of their workmanship is still disputed, however, and [...] there were reports of shoddy, late and over-budget projects, undercutting the success of the programme.¹²⁶

5.3.2 Logging in the Mayombe

Another significant effort from the Cuban technical mission after the Second War of Liberation was the *Contingente Forestal Arnaldo Milián*. More than 500 Cubans and 100 Angolans were dispatched to the Mayombe Forest in Cabinda for a large logging operation, clearing 14 000 cubic meters of rainforest in just three months, however, it is unclear exactly when it began. According to George, although the logging operation in Cabinda was “[...] Cuba’s single largest civilian project in Angola”, it remains controversial due to public perception and local ecological impact.¹²⁷ A 2018 article from the Cuban state-controlled news outlet *Agencia Cubana de Noticias* claims that by 1985, the logging operation in Cabinda had cleared 100 000 cubic meters of wood, but no source is provided, and it has

¹²⁵ Hatzky 2015: 77

¹²⁶ George 2005: 160

¹²⁷ Ibid: 161

proved difficult to verify this number.¹²⁸ Moreover, the article does not mention the controversiality of the operation that George describes.

5.3.2 Military cooperation

As was the medical branch, the technical branch was heavily involved with the military. For example, during the battle for Cuito Cuanavale in 1987 and 1988, Cuban and Angolan engineers were employed to lay minefield and booby traps to limit the movement of SADF and UNITA forces.¹²⁹ Another case occurred in the spring and summer of 1988, during the Cuban offensive which eventually pushed the South Africans completely out of southern Angola. An important part of this strategic offensive was to gain air superiority across the Angolan-Namibian border, and thus, Cuban and Angolan construction teams worked “around the clock” to get two airstrips south of the defensive line, in Cahama and Xangongo, operational. Additionally, an extensive network of anti-aircraft batteries and radars were installed.¹³⁰ The first runway at Cahama opened on June 3, 1988, extending the range of Cuban fighter aircraft well into northern Namibia, allowing them to strike against SADF airports there.¹³¹ As mentioned in the section on military aid, Gleijeses considers the defense of Cuito Cuanavale and the march on the Namibian border to be central in the outcome of the negotiations that resulted in the Tripartite Accords of December 1988. He argues that these two events, in particular, gave the MPLA a significantly better hand in negotiations, resulting in the end of foreign involvement and the implementation of Resolution 435.¹³² The explicit involvement of the technical branch in both of these events is enough to warrant mentioning, although their overall role was arguably minor.

Although it is generally not given as much academic attention as the other branches of the civil cooperation program, the projects undertaken by the technical branch had considerable effects both on military strategy and the Cubans’ ability to deliver other forms of aid. The reconstruction project that began in 1977 laid the groundwork that allowed for more efficient logistics and distribution of materials, as well as contributing to housing refugees. The

¹²⁸ Perez 2018

¹²⁹ Saney 2014: 172-173

¹³⁰ George 2005: 236-237

¹³¹ Gleijeses 2013: 455

¹³² Ibid: 467

logging operation in Cabinda was also of economic use to the MPLA. In terms of military strategy, the examples we have discussed illustrate that the technical branch enabled Cuban forces to, among other things, better protect their positions, and extend their air power. Not all projects undertaken by the technical branch were as successful as the ones mentioned, however. Usually, these less-than-successful ventures are hardly documented, but George mentions failed attempts at reviving Angola's coffee and sugar plantations.¹³³ Beyond this, it has been difficult to find information about any Cuban agricultural projects in Angola, suggesting that their influence may have been minimal. The disputed quality of various construction projects undertaken by the Cubans also calls into question the long-term significance of these works.

6. The limits of Cuban aid: SONANGOL

Petroleum exports have been an important part of the Angolan economy continuously since the times of the Salazar regime, and it still represents the majority vast of Angolan exports into the 21st century; according to the World Trade Organization, fuels and mining products constituted 97.8% of Angolan commodity exports in 2019.¹³⁴ Because this metric lumps the two categories together, it is important to note that the country has a significant mining industry, particularly in diamonds. Therefore, the percentage that fuel exports on their own will be somewhat lower than the given number, but it is still clear that petrochemical products constitute the brunt of Angolan export revenue.

6.1 The Angolan oil industry

The Angolan oil industry had its beginnings before the outbreak of World War I, but production did not significantly pick up until nearly half a century later.¹³⁵ Up until this point, we have argued that Cuban intervention, particularly civil aid, had a significant direct effect in nearly all branches of the MPLA state, but the Angolan state oil company SONANGOL was remained nearly untouched by Cuban influence throughout the duration of the conflict,

¹³³ George 2005: 161

¹³⁴ WTO 2019

¹³⁵ Frynas & Wood, 2001: 589

but its role in funding the MPLA and its continued success makes it of particular interest to our discussion.

SONANGOL (*Sociedade Nacional de Combustíveis de Angola*) was set up by the fledgling MPLA state in 1976 as its state oil corporation, and it continues to operate under the same name today.¹³⁶ According to Ricardo de Oliveira, the corporation functions as “[...] concessionaire, equity partner, and operator[...].”¹³⁷ all at once, making the divide between government agency and oil company unclear. Although the state was made owner “[...] of all hydrocarbon resources”, the industry itself was not nationalized, with the exception of the Portuguese-owned oil company ANGOL, which was expropriated by the MPLA.¹³⁸ Importantly, the US-owned firm Gulf Oil (subsidiary of Chevron since 1984) was not nationalized, and became a major source of funds for the Angolan government, and an annoyance for the U.S. government.¹³⁹

SONANGOL forced all oil companies operating in Angola to either form joint ventures with or work as a contractor under the company, leading to it being “[...] owner of a substantial share of the produced oil.”¹⁴⁰ Frynas & Wood point out that despite the extensive role the Angolan state plays in the industry, the foreign oil companies it forms ventures with stay in control of logistics and how production is run.¹⁴¹ By avoiding political moves that could potentially scare away foreign oil firms, the MPLA government managed to secure a relatively steady stream of revenue that was independent of the Cubans very soon after independence. Being “friendly” to Western oil companies, by way of low taxes or other incentives for exploration and operation, has proved a good monetary strategy for SONANGOL.¹⁴²

Besides being the backbone of the post-independence Angolan economy, several researchers have concluded that revenue from oil and diamond operations contributed to the continuation of conflict. The MPLA used oil revenue to pay for arms shipments, particularly after 1990,

¹³⁶ Frynas & Wood 2001: 590

¹³⁷ De Oliveira 2007: 608

¹³⁸ Ibid: 601

¹³⁹ Ibid: 599

¹⁴⁰ Frynas & Wood 2001: 590

¹⁴¹ Ibid: 590-592

¹⁴² Ibid: 591

but it had previously paid in oil for the technical assistance Cuba provided in 1976-1991.¹⁴³ Whereas MPLA controlled oil production, UNITA conducted diamond mining operations throughout parts of the country under its control to finance the protracted war, beginning in the late 1970s.¹⁴⁴ Frynas & Wood argue that without their respective revenue streams from oil and diamonds, the MPLA and UNITA “[...] would have found it much more difficult to continue waging the war after the departure of foreign powers.”¹⁴⁵ After 1991, Cuba descended into a serious economic crisis, effectively ending its foreign aid, and the Soviet Union was dissolved before the end of the year.¹⁴⁶ Yugoslavia, another important economic partner to Angola, also collapsed shortly after. Thus, Angola lost some of its most important sources of income, and it seems logical that SONANGOL had to fill in the gaps if the government were to continue its war.

Although the oil sector flourished despite, and maybe even because of, war, it was not entirely spared from the hostilities. As a critical source of funds for arms, technical assistance and foreign investment, the onshore oil wells and other petrochemical facilities became attractive targets for sabotage and hostilities. One of the most oft-cited examples of this occurred in 1985, when a South African commando team was caught attempting to blow up a Gulf Oil (Chevron) installation near Malongo in the Cabinda enclave.¹⁴⁷ More than 100 US staff were near the facility at the time.¹⁴⁸ The offshore fields were largely shielded from the direct effects of the violence inland, allowing oil production to continue even as territory changed hands.¹⁴⁹

When it comes to SONANGOL, it seems that the Cubans had little influence. Perhaps the most consequential way in which they contributed to the continued survival of the corporation was security. Cuban soldiers were, at the very least periodically, deployed to protect Gulf Oil facilities. This led to the now somewhat known illustration of the complexities of the conflict: Cuban soldiers with Soviet weapons in Angola, protecting US-

¹⁴³ Frynas & Wood 2001: 594

¹⁴⁴ Le Billon 2001: 67

¹⁴⁵ Frynas & Wood 2001: 594

¹⁴⁶ Gleijeses 2013: 494

¹⁴⁷ Ibid: 252-253

¹⁴⁸ Frynas & Wood 2001: 592

¹⁴⁹ Ibid: 593

owned oil installations from US-backed rebels.¹⁵⁰ Otherwise, the corporation was run in a way that bears more resemblance to western-friendly oil nations, like Nigeria, than one would expect given the MPLA's Marxist-Leninist doctrine.¹⁵¹ The economic isolation of SONANGOL, and the failure to diversify the Angolan economy, has led the oil sector to become what Le Billon describes as an *enclave economy*, meaning that despite formal integration into the national economy, the revenue it generates is rendered mostly inaccessible to the general population; the entire sector employed only 10 000 nationals in 2001.¹⁵² Thus, the direct impact SONANGOL and the rest of the oil sector have on the daily lives of Angolans is highly limited.

7. The effects of Cuban aid

In this section, we will discuss and attempt to evaluate the influence of Cuban aid on the persistence and survival of the MPLA in the short and long term, based on the accounts and examples we have provided thus far. Typically, such analyses rely heavily on military and diplomatic history from a Cold War perspective. Although this is by no means invalid or unimportant, and it is impossible to entirely detach oneself from the Cold War framework in the case of Angola, we have chosen to emphasize the MPLA and Cuba as (relatively) independent actors, focusing on the cooperation between the two countries rather than their alignment and interactions with the eastern and western blocs.

Justin Pearce, in studying “[...] the impact of the Cold War upon local politics in Angola during the civil war”, argues that the major influence of the foreign powers involved was “[...] through ideologies of stateness, more than through the official ideologies of the Cold War”.¹⁵³ More specifically, Pearce argues that the MPLA and UNITA largely based their respective claims as the legitimate state of Angola on their ability to appear and function like a state (‘stateness’), and not on their political ideology, at least in the local context. In fact,

¹⁵⁰ Le Billon 2001: 65; de Oliveira 2007: 602

¹⁵¹ Frynas & Wood 2001: 590

¹⁵² Le Billon 2001: 61, 63

¹⁵³ Pearce 2017: 15-16

only a small proportion of his Angolan interviewees seemed aware of the parties' ideological alignment in global politics.¹⁵⁴

[...] UNITA, like the MPLA, based its legitimacy on its ability to make state-like claims, claims based on responsibilities of social organisation and welfare provision, and on prerogatives of violence in defence of a nation [...]¹⁵⁵

Pearce's conclusion, of 'function over form', is a core assumption of our argument, and our focus in this discussion is identifying ways in which Cuba influenced the MPLA's state building project.

7.1 Reconstruction and stabilization

The most frequently discussed aspect of Cuban aid in this context is likely the military assistance provided to the MPLA between 1975 and 1991. As demonstrated in section 4, Cuban support played a central role in several military operations, which the researchers we discuss find significant to the outcome of the civil war. Operation Carlota came at a time when the MPLA was under serious military threat from both the FNLA and SADF, and it seems reasonable to claim that the Cuban (and Soviet) military assistance provided in 1975-76 was a decisive factor in the survival of the MPLA. More important to our discussion is the fact that Carlota allowed the MPLA to continue establishing the legitimacy of its statehood, locally and internationally, by avoiding overthrow and power-sharing deals with FNLA or UNITA.

Cuban aid to Angola was always provided on the MPLA's terms, integrated to support its ongoing state-building project. As discussed in section 5, Cuban advisors were involved in the establishment of the Angolan education and healthcare systems. According to Hatzky, her Angolan interviewees recognized the Cuban contribution as "essential" and "stabilizing". Despite other criticisms of the Cuban advisor program that arose when she conducted these interviews in 2006, responses suggest a lasting influence in this area of Angolan state

¹⁵⁴ Pearce 2017: 26

¹⁵⁵ Ibid: 25

welfare.¹⁵⁶ In addition to being involved administratively, the Angolan education system was also staffed by Cuban teachers and student teachers. Due to lacking literature on other Angolan welfare services, education has served as our primary example, but the evidence of Cuban assistance having a lasting institutional influence suggests that other welfare services in the country may also have been influenced in a similar way, although this is impossible to prove without extensive access to archives in Luanda. The inclusion of economists and administrative advisors in the Cuban technical mission also supports this suggestion, although their influence is far more difficult to trace.

Another state-like claim outlined by Pearce, “prerogatives of violence in defence of a nation”, pertains to police and military forces to enforce borders and laws, which is reminiscent of Weber’s famed definition of the state being the only entity with a monopoly of legitimate use of force within its territory.¹⁵⁷ The MPLA already had an armed wing – FAPLA – but at the outset of the Civil War in 1975, it was a weak military force. To enforce its legitimacy, it was necessary for the MPLA to develop a coherent national army that would be able to continue functioning after the Cubans and Soviets had left. Throughout the period of foreign involvement, Soviet and Cuban advisors played a major role in training FAPLA troops, and while organization and training of FAPLA was hotly debated between the Soviet and Cuban missions, the aim was to build a national Angolan army that would be able to defend the territory and integrity of the MPLA without relying on foreign aid. Angola has not experienced a substantial foreign invasion since the Cubans withdrew, so it is impossible to determine whether its army would be able to withstand such an event. What is certain, is that the Angolan army was capable enough to sustain a decade-long war with UNITA with little outside aid compared to the 1975-1991 phase.

In 1987 and 1988, Cuba again played a central role in turning the military situation in Angola in favor of FAPLA, and the Cubans, which Saney, George and Gleijeses agree had significant effects on the outcome of the Tripartite Agreements of December 1988. Although violence between the MPLA and UNITA resumed shortly after the departure of the Cubans, the agreements also legitimized the MPLA’s rule over Angola on the international stage, as UNITA was not involved in the peace talks. The agreements also led to the independence of

¹⁵⁶ Hatzky 2015: 199

¹⁵⁷ Pearce 2017, 25; Weber in Waters 2015 [1919]: 10-11

Namibia, and it could no longer be used as a springboard by the SADF for incursions into Southern Angola. This meant that the risk of foreign invasion was significantly reduced, and although the MPLA was left without Cuban support, UNITA could in turn no longer rely on South Africa.

In summary, we argue that Cuban aid was central to the short-term outcome of the civil war in two main ways. First, the Cuban army acted as security guarantor for the MPLA, protecting it from South African aggression, which could have overwhelmed the young Angolan state if left unchecked. This led to the MPLA avoiding overthrow, and all power-sharing deals entirely. Second, Cuban technical aid played an important supporting role in the MPLA's state building project, giving it an advantage over UNITA's challenge to its legitimacy.

The conclusions we have reached so far suggest that the Cubans had extensive influence on multiple central areas of the Angolan state following independence from Portugal in 1975. But although Cubans and South Africans had left the country by 1991, the war was not over in Angola, and the MPLA's claim to legitimacy was still being challenged.

7.2 Continued war and the long-term failure of aid

Cuban aid ended in 1991, but armed conflict between the MPLA and UNITA resumed only a year later, and continue for another decade, before hostilities finally ended in 2002. It is only after this point that the MPLA's claim to legitimacy no longer met any substantial resistance, and its power was finally consolidated. However, the MPLA state that emerged victorious in 2002 no longer exhibited the characteristics of Cuban involvement one would expect given the scale of the aid project between 1975 and 1991. As the MPLA instated market reforms in 1985 and began cultivating its diplomatic and business relations with the West, it became clear that Cuba held little long-term ideological sway over the MPLA. This was confirmed when the MPLA formally abandoned Marxism-Leninism in 1991.¹⁵⁸

The dramatic reduction in foreign aid after 1991, despite continued armed struggle, meant that the MPLA had to finance its struggle against UNITA through other means. The failure of

¹⁵⁸ George 2005: 299, appendix 1

attempts by Cubans to diversify the Angolan economy, however, led to the MPLA relying almost exclusively on revenue from its oil sector and SONANGOL for state income.

SONANGOL has been a success in monetary terms, making Angola a major actor in the African petroleum market, but it has been marred by the corruption of the Dos Santos presidency, and the funds it has generated have been subject to constant mismanagement.¹⁵⁹ Thus, the economic success Angola experienced in the decade after 2002 did not translate to prosperity for the Angolan people. Angola continues to rank in the UN “Least Developed Country” category.¹⁶⁰ Data provided to UNESCO Institute for Statistics is incomplete and only stretches back to 2002, but it suggests that a significant share of Angolan children are still not participating in school.¹⁶¹

Ultimately, it seems that only Cuban military aid had a long-term influence on the Angolan state, in the sense that the Cuban army contributed to the continued survival and security of the MPLA while undertaking its state-building project. Beyond military aid, the various forms of civil engagement seem to have had little impact on the modern Angolan state. Hatzky asserts that “[...] after 1991, the ensuing civil war destroyed the efforts of civil reconstruction”, and this aligns with our judgement.¹⁶²

8. Conclusions

Nearly half a millennium of colonial repression, followed by 41 years of virtually constant warfare has shaped Angolan society fundamentally. The Cold War climate that coincided temporally with Angolan independence turned the country into a proxy battlefield, but Cuba proved most helpful out of all foreign involvement, with assistance provided in the name of anticolonialism and liberation; battles Cuba had, itself, fought decades prior.

In this discussion, we have attempted to shed light upon the intricacies of the Cuban-Angolan relationship, and demonstrated that discussions on this subject can benefit from viewing the causes and effects of aid and cooperation. We argue that the survival of the MPLA and its

¹⁵⁹ Le Billon 2001: 79

¹⁶⁰ UN 2021

¹⁶¹ UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2022

¹⁶² Hatzky 2015: 288

status as the ruling Angolan party is a major legacy of Cuban involvement, but the potential long-term effects of the civil aid mission were essentially nullified by the continuation of conflict after Cuban withdrawal.

We have attempted to contribute to a wider understanding of Cuban and Angolan cooperation, and as currently closed archives are made more transparent, future research on this subject will be able to fill in the details omitted here, and the dynamics of the postcolonial conflicts in Southern Africa can be eventually understood with further nuance.

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