

liographic details of the source. The review should begin with a heading that includes all the bibliographic data. The elements of the heading should be arranged in the order presented in the following example:

The early mission in South Africa/Die vroeë sending in Suid-Afrika, 1799-1819. Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2005, 272 pp., map, chronology, bibl., index. ISBN: 1-9198525-42-8. By Karel Schoeman.

Do not indent the first line of the first paragraph, but indent the first line of all successive paragraphs. Use double spacing for the entire review. Add your name and institutional affiliation at the end of the review. Accuracy of content, grammar, spelling, and citations rests with the reviewer, and we encourage you to check these before submission. Reviews may be transmitted electronically as a Word file attachment to an email to the review editor. If you have additional questions, please contact the Book Review Editors.

*More on Soviet military personnel in Angola Cuito Cuanavale:
Frontline accounts by Soviet soldiers*

**(Translated by T Reilly. Auckland Park: Jacana, 2014, 222 pp.
ISBN: 978-1431409631)**

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The battle between the invading South African armed forces and Angola's FAPLA around the small town of Cuito Cuanavale was a key moment in the so-called "Border War". The fighting lasted for several months between August 1987 and March 1988, and the battle ended – and judgements differ sharply on this – either in victory for the Angolans and their Cuban allies, who were able to prevent the capture of the town, or in success for the South Africans, who wanted to protect UNITA's territory in southern Angola, and hence to block access by SWAPO to the border between Angola and Namibia.

The SADF had been involved in southern Angola on and off since October 1975, supporting UNITA and defending South African control of South-West Africa (now Namibia) from incursions by SWAPO, the liberation movement fighting for national independence. However, by the mid-1980s

and with Soviet logistical help, the balance of forces was shifting significantly away from SADF dominance. Angolan military capacity had improved significantly, especially in terms of an extensive radar screen that, together with their access to modern MiG fighter planes, had helped FAPLA and the Cubans to gain control of the air. In August 1987, probably on Soviet advice, the Angolans therefore began to plan a conventional attack against Jamba, the main UNITA military base and headquarters. In response, the South Africans quickly mobilised large numbers of troops, and with their UNITA allies, were able to block the FAPLA advance on Jamba. They then counter-attacked, but were stopped in their turn by the Angolans and Cubans, dug in around Cuito Cuanavale. Despite the use of long-range artillery to bombard the town, and repeated assaults by UNITA infantry, the situation turned into a stalemate.

This battle has for many years been widely regarded as a turning point in Namibia's progress towards independence, and eventually towards the end of the internal conflict inside Angola between the MPLA government and UNITA as well. Nevertheless, in the intervening thirty years, opinion about what actually happened and what it meant politically and militarily has remained as sharply divided as ever. There is an extensive literature on the Border War and on the battle itself, much of it contentious (see, e.g. Scholtz's polemical 2011 review article on the battle in *Scientia Militaria*). Other books and articles include works by the late Thomas Ohlson, Horace Campbell, Fred Bridgland, and the multi-faceted collection edited by Ian Liebenberg, Jorge Risquet and Vladimir Shubin, *A Far-Away War: Angola, 1975-1989* (2015).

So what does the book under review add to our overall understanding of the nature of the battle, and to our knowledge of covert Soviet involvement in combat operations in Angola? The short answer is disappointingly little beyond the anecdotal. The book is described on the cover as a follow-up to *Bush War: the Road to Cuito Cuanavale* (2011), which this reviewer discussed in the pages of the *Journal of Southern African Studies* in 2017. In that review I pointed out that these Russian/Soviet memoirs of Angolan combat are part of a larger, self-referential body of work, the purpose of which is at least partly to secure legal recognition in Russia of the veterans' role in Angola, and consequently access to state pensions as former combatants in overseas wars (*veterany boevykh deistvii*). Struggles over formal and permanent recognition as war veterans (*uchastniki voiny*) – a legal status that has in the past carried multiple advantages such as cheap travel, access to interest-free loans, and special holidays – have a long history in Russia, going all the way back to

CPSU resolution no.907 of November 1978. Even in Soviet times, however, the right to the status (for participants in the ‘Great Patriotic War’) was narrowly defined. The association to which the Angolan veterans belong, the *Soyuz Veteranov Angoly* (Union of Angola Veterans) runs a website which contains a large amount of this kind of material, in Russian, by these and other ex-combatants, at least partly in support of their hopeful claims. The chapter in this book headed ‘Four Soviet Veterans’ is taken directly from the website.

This book, whose editorial team included the late Gennady Shubin as well as the veteran Igor Zhdarkin, himself a memoirist of note, consists of extremely lightly-edited memoirs by twelve different ex-Soviet ex-soldiers, the majority of whom are described as having served as military interpreters or translators. It includes sixteen pages of photographs printed on glossy paper, many of them in colour. As interpreters, the unfortunate Soviets do not seem to have been especially well-prepared or effective, although they were exposed to serious danger in combat situations. Igor Bakush describes how a colleague, Oleg Snitko, (who trained in Kiev and seems to have been a Ukrainian) died after being wounded in action near Cuito Cuanavale, despite being medivacked to safety by helicopter (p. 133-134).

Alexander Kalan writes that he completed ‘an accelerated ten-month Portuguese language course’ in 1986, but when he arrived in Angola with his compatriots “we could understand nothing of the Angolans’ speech” (p. 62). The book also includes a diary written by Kalan, covering four months from 13 July to 17 November 1987, with no explanation by the editors of how he was able first of all to write it, and second, to smuggle it home against regulations. Another non-Russian interpreter, Oleg Gritsuk, writes that he studied Spanish at the Minsk State Educational Institute for Foreign Languages (in what is now Belarus), but was sent to Angola to learn Portuguese “on the job” – presumably on the grounds that Spanish is fairly similar to Portuguese. He writes that to begin with he “didn’t understand anything in Portuguese and could not translate at all” (p. 145). One wonders, of course, what price was paid in combat situations for this inability to communicate effectively.

The Belarusian, Gritsuk, also testifies that there was “no particular enmity” between the uneducated teenage soldiers of FAPLA and UNITA:

When government troops captured UNITA prisoners they would immediately fraternise ... There would be a military counterintelligence officer ... who would supposedly conduct an interrogation, but the prisoner would

know nothing and understand nothing about maps as well. They would just feed him and let him go (p. 155).

Unhappily, the book is almost completely lacking in explanatory or contextual apparatus, presumably in the hope that the texts will be able to speak for themselves. Apart from the testimonies themselves, there is also an introduction, a conclusion (devoted to the debunking of several “myths” about the battle), and a “List of Major Weaponry” (p. 214-222). This is arranged in two sections, SADF and UNITA on the one hand, and Soviet, Cuban and FAPLA on the other. Within each section, the descriptions – whether of aircraft, trucks, artillery, or light weapons – are simply in alphabetical order, e.g. “M-38: Soviet-made 82-mm mortar”. It is thus left to the reader to try to make sense of the list.

The introduction consists of a broad brushstroke account of the military events of 1987-1988, including details of Soviet involvement, but offers no comment on the accounts by the Soviet participants which are the book’s *raison d’être*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the editors conclude their introduction with the large claim that:

The failure of the South African offensive near Cuito Cuanavale and the appearance of units of the Cuban forces at the Namibian border forced the South African government to call off its military actions and to begin negotiations. As a result, on 22 December 1988 in New York, a three-sided agreement was signed between South Africa, Angola and Cuba ... A direct result of this agreement was the granting of independence to Namibia and the dismantling of the apartheid system in South Africa (p. 12).

It is certainly defensible to argue that the battle was a turning point in the liberation of southern Africa as a region, but to claim that this was simply a “direct result” is to risk privileging the military over other factors in the process, including the political and the economic.