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Igor Zhdarkin. *We Did Not See It Even in Afghanistan: Memoirs of a Participant of the Angolan War (1986-1988).* Moscow: Memories Mockba, 2008. Translated by Tamara Reilly. 399 pp. ISBN 978-5-903116-57-7.

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A Russian View of the Angolan War

This book is to be welcomed as an alternative to the usual accounts of the Angolan War by South African participants and their apologists. For here is a Russian version, by a military officer, Igor Zhdarkin, who served as an advisor/translator to the Angolan armed forces known as FAPLA (Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angola), the military wing of the ruling Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). His account is published as part of a collection of memoirs in the series Oral History of Forgotten Wars by the Africa Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow. Unfortunately, in the introduction, Gennady Shubin, senior research fellow at the institute, does not indicate what other "forgotten wars" are to be included in the series or why they have been so labeled.

The English section of Zhdarkin's recollections (consisting of the final 150 pages of the 400-page book, the first part of which comprises the Russian version) consists of two major parts: a diary kept by Zhdarkin from October 10 to December 3, 1987, as military interpreter of the 2lst FAPLA brigade, and the author's "oral narratives," or tape-recorded memories, produced at the Africa institute since 2000-01. Unfortunately, the "Notebook-Diary" in part 1 is a great disappointment because the author's daily "recollections" come to an abrupt end in December 1987, before the crucial battles for Cuito Cuanavale had even begun. As his final entry (dated December 3) reads, "our brigade is in its positions in the forest. We are awaiting a possible enemy attack and we have no idea of what will happen next" (p. 302). Nor does the reader know what happened next, since Zhdarkin disappears from the scene of battle, only to return to Cuito Cuanavale after the South African Defence Force's (SADF) initial assaults on the "Tempo Triangle" have been rebuffed in 1988. None of these decisive battles, which are recorded in great detail in the South African accounts of the war (irrespective of their triumphant distortions), are mentioned by Zhdarkin. Only in a later commentary does he explain that he returned to Cuito Cuanavale on March 11, 1988 (after more than two months at the FAPLA base at Lobito), adding only that, "I cannot say why I returned. But I was summoned there" (p. 368). Then, from the final reading in the diary, the book leaps into the "author commentaries" recorded in Moscow from 2000, separated only by a song written by Zhdarkin in Cuito Cuanavale in December 1987.

Even with this abrupt ending of the diary, the daily entries should not to be underrated, since they contain a vivid account of the 1987 battles for the control of the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA) stronghold of Mavinga, which reached a climax at the crossing of the Lomba River toward the end of that year. For this is where FAPLA was forced to withdraw under heavy bombardment by the SADF, which had intervened to save their UNITA ally from annihilation. Once again, UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi claimed the victory for his forces, and even his U.S. benefactor, President Ronald Reagan, intervened with a message of congratulations for the "heroes of the Lomba River."

But none of these particular events are recalled in the book as the diary opens with the retreat from the Lomba River crossing. From there, Zhdarkin and the 2lst brigade began their long march to join the other FAPLA brigades, which were regrouping in the aftermath of the disastrous rout to prepare for the defense of their key base at Cuito Cuanavale. The retreat was indeed a harrowing experience, as the title of the book reveals, since FAPLA troops were under continual bombardment by the SADF, along with the sniping, mining, and other harassment by the UNITA forces on the ground. As the author relates, even the Russians who had served in Afghanistan had never experienced such "horrors" as the barrage of SADF artillery across the Lomba River. Under fire from the G-

6 guns and the Mirage and Buccaneer aircraft, FAPLA brigades panicked and deserted the field in flight, leaving behind their Soviet equipment in a graveyard of tanks, trucks, ammunition, and other materiel. At one stage of the retreat (according to Zhdarkin), they were even bombed with "chemical weapons containing poisonous gas," against which they had no gas masks for protection (p. 269). Finally, and after nearly two months of retreating under fire, the author was able to join the Soviet advisors of the 59th and 16th brigades awaiting the defense of Cuito Cuanavale.

The commentaries that constitute the second part of the book contain a wide range of subjects, beginning with an account of the training and preparation of Soviet advisors for service in Angola and ending with an explanation for the Angolan defeat in 1987. In between, the author reveals his views of the participants in the conflict, including FAPLA, South Africans, and Cubans, and the Soviet advisors' interactions with them. Some commentaries are in the form of questions to and answers from the author, including those that a tourist or visitor might ask, such as the prevalence of snakes (how many did you see?) and alcoholic beverages (how much did they drink?). But many more questions are concerned with the types of Soviet weapons used and their effectiveness for the Angolan terrain, which are shown in the photographs in the book.

The most revealing commentaries are those concerning the author's opinion of the participants. On first impressions of Angola, he found Luanda "more horrible" than other places he had visited. "Just a pile of shit," he described it, as he viewed "the dirty airport and the ragged women and children on the floor" (a scene also observed by this reviewer) and the piles of rubbish covering the streets of Luanda (p. 314). As for the Angolan soldiers, they were "unsuitable for war." Not only were they "afraid to take part in combat actions," they were also unwilling to follow the "reasonable advice" of their Soviet advisors (p. 341). Consequently, it was necessary for the advisors to tell the Angolans that they were wrong and beat them up accordingly. As the author explains, because many Soviet advisors were not familiar with "the peculiarities of the black Angolan mentality," they often found it difficult to relate to them and obtain results (pp. 312-313).

In contrast, the author does not say anything "bad" about the South Africans. "They fought well and competently because they were whites, because I myself am white and because South Africa related to us as whites to whites" (p. 369). He was also impressed by the "ultimatum" delivered to Soviet soldiers inside the shells fired by the SADF artillery: "Soviets, leave Cuito Cuanavale. We don't want to touch you–our so-called white brothers. We want to cut up the Angolans" (p. 363).

The most effusive praise was rightly reserved for the Cubans, without whom the author would not have survived to record these memoirs. It was the Cubans who had supplied them, fought and died for Angola, and forced South Africa to sue for peace after having allegedly destroyed most of their tanks and driven the SADF out of Angolan and back over the Namibian border. In effect, "the Cubans did everything of importance" to ensure that the defense of Cuito Cuanvale would succeed after the disastrous retreat from the Lomba River described in the diary (p. 379). Above all, they tried to persuade the Soviet advisors that they must "adapt" to the Angolan soldiers on whom they relied and not judge the situation in Angola as if it were the Soviet Union (p. 379).

The book ends with an addendum on the memoirs of South African Chief of Staff General Jannie Geldenhuys in which Zhdarkin doubts the accuracy of the general's tally of South African gains and losses during the fighting in Angola in 1987-88. This is scarcely surprising since the purpose of the general's account was to convey the impression that the SADF not only won the war but also brought "peace" by fighting it. This is followed by two appendices, one an extensive collection of photographs of participants and military equipment and the other a note recording the names of the Soviet military advisors who had served in Angola since November 1975, of whom there were thousands of servicemen and officers, including generals, admirals, and "civil specialists."

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