

2009

h-dipla

H-Diplo Review ESSAY

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/>

H-Diplo Review Essays Editor: Diane N. Labrosse

H-Diplo Review Essays Web Editor: George Fujii

Published on **12 June 2009**

Vladimir Gennadyevich Shubin. *The Hot 'Cold War': The USSR in Southern Africa.* Pluto Press, 2008. 320 pp. Plates, notes, glossary, index. ISBN-13: 978-0745324722.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Gleijeses-Shubin.pdf>

Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Piero Gleijeses**, The Johns Hopkins University, SAIS

Vladimir Shubin argues in *The Hot 'Cold War'* that Moscow played a very constructive role in southern Africa. Shubin, a former Soviet official who worked for two decades on Africa – first in the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee and then in the International Department of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union – takes the reader through thirty years of Soviet policy in southern Africa, from the early 1960s to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. He proceeds geographically, exploring Soviet policy toward Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa.

The history of the Cold War in southern Africa has not yet been written. It is a kaleidoscope in which the perennial clash between the United States and the Soviet Union is superimposed on the bitter conflict among the local actors – apartheid South Africa, black governments, and liberation movements. In 1975, the most improbable of protagonists, the Cuba of Fidel Castro, burst onto the stage with tens of thousands of soldiers. A few good secondary accounts illuminate some moments of this saga, but much is still *terra incognita*. Those who have written about Soviet policy in southern Africa have relied on their imagination or documents from the U.S. and British archives. Vladimir Shubin is the first to use Soviet documents. His access was limited, however, and was particularly sparse for the years after 1975. He is upfront about this. "I am afraid that this narrative has to be uneven, perhaps even patchy," he explains. "It depends to a great extent on the availability (or rather non-availability) of archive material, success (or failure) in my search for witness-participants, preservation of my personal notes and the state of my memory." (p. 4) No one could fault him for failing to gather more Soviet documents. Shubin is a trailblazer, and he enriches our knowledge.

But he is a trailblazer on a mission. He writes, "If initially many politicians and authors tried to portray Cubans as 'Soviet proxies,' a new tendency appeared after the 'collapse' of

the Soviet Union: downplaying the role of the Soviets and emphasizing the differences between Havana and Moscow. It is now the right time to set the record straight." (p. 73)

In his attempt to "set the record straight" Shubin unwittingly exposes how perilous it is to rely on the archives of only one country when writing international history. Shubin has looked only at the partially open Soviet archives, and he has interviewed (with few exceptions) only Russian participants. Thus his book reflects the weaknesses and inaccuracies of his limited array of Soviet sources. *The Hot 'Cold War'* serves as a reminder of the obligation of scholars to check their evidence and to be sensitive to the weaknesses of their sources. This is particularly important when the historian, in an attempt to explore the shadowy corners of history in the developing world, moves beyond open western archives – where the rules are clear and documents (however redacted) are available to *bona fide* researchers – into the neverland of closed or semiclosed archives. The burden of transparency and carefulness falls particularly heavily on those, such as Shubin, whose conclusions challenge accepted truths.

I agree with Shubin's thesis that the Soviet Union, not the West, was "on the side of the angels" in southern Africa. I disagree, however, with the way he proceeds to this conclusion: in order to enhance the Soviet role he understates the importance of Cuban policy in Africa. This distorts the facts. Frequently, Shubin's distortions are subtle – a stray comment here, an oversight there, stressing one source and neglecting another – and I suspect that they will be invisible to most readers who are not steeped in the intricacies of Soviet and Cuban policies in southern Africa. I also suspect that many readers, who would otherwise dismiss Shubin's praise of the Soviet Union, may be drawn to his Moscow vs. Havana approach because Castro's Cuba still stands, bloodied but unbending, and its record in southern Africa – where it took the lead and the Kremlin followed – is hard to believe. It turns established wisdom about the relationship between the superpowers and their weak allies on its head.

I am well aware that in criticizing Shubin I run the risk of being accused of bias, of being on a mission myself. I have spent fifteen years doing research in the closed Cuban archives and I know that even objective scholars can fall under the spell of their documents, particularly if they dig in closed archives. There is only one antidote: to diversify and compare. Compare, for example, the evidence that emerges from the Cuban, the U.S. and the South African archives; then enrich the mixture with other relevant archives that offer a different perspective – those of Zambia, the former German Democratic Republic, the United Kingdom, Yugoslavia, and the Italian Communist Party. (The Angolan archives remain hermetically closed.) Only the combination of sources from the West, the Communist world, and Africa will allow us to reach a better understanding of the Cold War in southern Africa.

I will focus on Shubin's discussion of Soviet policy in Angola, because it occupies almost half the book and because it is here that his greatest contributions and grossest distortions occur. The section begins well: Shubin's analysis of the struggle against

Portuguese colonial rule (1961-74) is excellent. He uses several good documents from the Russian archives, some revealing interviews with Soviet protagonists, and his own notes of conversations with leaders of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), the liberation movement Moscow supported. He discusses with a sure hand the vicissitudes of Moscow's relations with the MPLA and the tensions between the Kremlin and the MPLA president, Agostinho Neto. I disagree with some of Shubin's assessments, but these are matters of interpretation not fact.

Following the collapse of the Portuguese dictatorship in 1974, civil war broke out among Angola's three guerrilla movements. In October 1975 South Africa, encouraged by the United States, invaded Angola to crush the MPLA, which was on the verge of defeating its two rivals. As the South Africans raced toward Luanda, MPLA resistance crumbled. Pretoria's army would have seized the capital had Castro not decided to send troops in response to the MPLA's desperate appeals. As Shubin points out, "the archive documents and oral sources prove that Havana's decision was its own." (p. 52) Indeed, Castro did not consult or even inform Soviet Secretary General Leonid Brezhnev before making his decision because he knew that Brezhnev was loath to do anything that could derail détente with the United States. The Cuban troops halted the South African invasion, and in late March 1976 the South Africans withdrew into Namibia. The MPLA established the People's Republic of Angola, and Neto became the country's president.

Shubin's discussion of Soviet policy toward Angola in 1975-76 is good, but less rich than for the earlier period, for a simple reason: he has fewer sources. Until 1975 Soviet relations with the MPLA were handled at a relatively low level because assistance to a liberation movement did not involve high state policy. Shubin, a mid-level official, had access to the relevant documents. But in 1975, Angola was elevated to a major cold war crisis, which meant that decision-making was bumped up to a much higher level. Shubin had no access to the very senior officials who made the decisions, and the documents remain classified. His account of these crucial months relies instead on interviews with lower-level Soviet protagonists on the ground and on some of the reports they wrote. It adds depth and texture to the story. While many questions are still unanswered, this is the most authoritative account of Soviet policy in Angola in those two critical years.

What is troubling is Shubin's discussion of the late 1970s and 1980s. Let me first outline the facts, as I understand them, in broad strokes. After independence, Angola became Moscow's key ally in southern Africa. For the next fifteen years (from 1976 to 1991) the Soviets supplied virtually all Angola's arms. A Soviet military mission of over 1,000 men helped train the Angolan army in the use of the Soviet weapons, repair the equipment, and assist in strategic planning. The Soviet mission coexisted with a much larger Cuban military mission – more than 30,000 soldiers whose main role was to protect Angola from a South African invasion. Bowing to the South Africans' air superiority in southern Angola, the Cubans pulled their troops some 150 miles north of the Namibian border, creating a defensive line that barred access to the heart of Angola. Through the 1980s, the South Africans launched bruising invasions of Angola south of the Cuban defensive line,

but they never breached the line. My research in the South African archives reveals how necessary the Cuban military presence was: Pretoria's goal was to topple the MPLA government and replace it with the rebel leader Jonas Savimbi who had pledged that once in power he would expel from Angola the South African liberation fighters (ANC) and the guerrillas of the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) who were fighting for Namibia's independence from South Africa. That is, regime change in Angola would not only make the ANC's struggle more difficult, it would also help stabilize South African rule over Namibia.

Shubin has very few sources on this important period. Fully half of his brief discussion of the late 1970s is devoted to the coup attempt against President Neto in May 1977 led by Nito Alves. Westerners as well as Africans, scholars as well as bureaucrats cite this coup attempt – in which the Cubans openly supported Neto and the Soviets quietly backed Alves – as a glaring example of the divergence of Soviet and Cuban policy in Angola. "The Cubans and the Russians haven't been always united in Angola," U.S. Ambassador Andrew Young told a Senate subcommittee in 1978. "When there was a recent coup attempt against Neto, it was pretty clear from African sources that the Russians were behind that coup. Yet the Cubans sided with Neto." Five years later, the *Times* (of London) reported that in Luanda "it is said *sotto voce*" that Alves had acted "with Russian support."¹

Shubin, however, disagrees. "I believe that the rumours of Soviet involvement in 'Alves coup' were deliberately spread by Western circles, as well as some forces within Angola, which questioned its 'too close' links with Moscow." (p. 70) He provides no evidence for this assertion. This is a case in which probing beyond Russian sources would have been edifying. While there is no smoking gun, the documents in the open Yugoslav archives as well as in the closed Cuban archives, together with the testimonies of key Angolan officials, all point to Soviet complicity with the plotters. A few days after the failed coup, Neto told the Yugoslav ambassador "that Cuba behaved well, unlike the Soviet Union."²

It is in discussing the 1980s that Shubin's zero-sum-game, his Moscow vs. Havana approach, emerges with full force. At first sight, his treatment of the decade seems simply idiosyncratic. He says very little about Castro's decision in November 1987 – made without consulting Moscow – to send reinforcements to Angola to push the South Africans out of the country once and for all, and he barely mentions the ensuing negotiations that led, finally, to Namibian independence. Shubin brushes over these momentous events in just a few pages, without addressing any major issue, such as the clash between Moscow and Havana or the Soviet role in the Angolans' foolhardy offensive against Savimbi in July 1987. His analysis and even understanding of these important

¹ Andrew Young, May 12, 1978, in US Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on African Affairs, *U.S. Policy toward Africa*, p. 32; *Times* (London), Sept. 7, 1983, p. 6.

² Department of Foreign-Political Affairs, "Predsednik Neto Razgovarao s Nasim Ambasadorom. June 2, 1977," Belgrade, June 17, 1977, p. 2, Museum of Yugoslav History, Archive of Josip Broz Tito, Belgrade.

events is straightjacketed by his failure to consult the South African and U.S. archives.

Shubin focuses instead on 1982-1985, the period when General Konstantin Kurochkin headed the Soviet military mission in Angola. The reason is simple: "Kurochkin kindly proposed that I consult three notebooks, containing minutes or summaries of almost all the meetings he had in the three years of his service in Africa. They are especially valuable because they were written straight away, without any further 'improvements,' which unfortunately occur frequently in memoirs and 'oral histories.'" (p. 78)

Konstantin Kurochkin was a formidable personality who exerted a very strong influence over Soviet military strategy in Angola. "No other head of the Soviet Military Mission was as influential as Konstantin, not before him and not after him," General Roberto Ramos Monteiro (Ngongo), who was the deputy chief of staff of the Angolan army, told me. "Konstantin! Even after he had left Angola, even when he was back in the Soviet Union, we could feel his presence. He really wanted to impose his views; he didn't like to listen. He thought that since he was giving us the weapons, we had to do what he said."³

Every single one of the six Cuban and ten Angolan Generals I have asked about Konstantin paid homage to his achievements. He was the most effective advocate with Moscow for more and better weapons for the Angolan army, and for more scholarships for Angolan officers to study and train in the Soviet Union. But he could not adapt to the needs of guerrilla warfare. General António dos Santos França, who was the Angolan chief of staff in the 1980s, reflected the general consensus when he told me: "Konstantin was the Head of the Soviet Military Mission who most helped us to get weapons, send people for military training in the USSR, and open centers of military instruction here. But as a military adviser he had an academic approach. His frame of reference was the Second World War. He created many problems for us. And he wanted to impose his views."⁴

Konstantin was a product of Soviet military thinking. As the CIA noted in a 1988 analysis, "The Soviets have trained and equipped their allies' forces according to the Soviet model to meet a conventional, not an insurgent threat. ... Soviet advisers have consistently advocated large combined-arms sweep operations – reminiscent of battle plans for Europe – instead of small-unit tactics recommended by Western theory."⁵

It is on this point that Shubin makes his stand. The strategy that the Soviet military mission advocated in Angola was well adapted to guerrilla warfare, he argues. Armed with Konstantin's notebooks, Shubin sets out to explore the complicated triangular relationship between the Cubans, Soviets, and Angolans. While the Angolans come in for

³ Interview with General Roberto Ramos Monteiro, Luanda, Nov. 20, 2007

⁴ Interview with General António dos Santos França, Luanda, Nov. 26, 2007.

⁵ CIA, Directorate of Intelligence, "Supporting Allies Under Insurgent Challenge: The Soviet Experience in Africa," Feb. 1988, pp. v-vi, 1. FOIA.

their share of criticism, it is the Cubans who bear the brunt of Shubin's – or rather, Konstantin's – wrath: they did not want to fight, they changed their views suddenly, they were inconsistent. The notebooks are Shubin's only source. At many points they must have been cryptic, and Shubin stumbles. His account becomes haphazard and disjointed. It would have been much improved had he consulted the South African military archives, which are open, well organized, and run by a competent and friendly staff. South African military advisers and intelligence officers participated in – on the opposing side, of course – many of the operations Konstantin describes, and their reports would have added depth to Shubin's discussion.

More importantly, because of his failure to consult other sources, Shubin is unable to assess the accuracy of Konstantin's version. He is apparently unaware that Konstantin distorts many facts and makes up others. For example, in February 1984, Konstantin met Fidel Castro in Havana. Shubin writes that Konstantin believed that "the Cubans were not eager to fight. They were in Angola but they were avoiding participation in combat, and it was necessary to compel them to be more active in the interest of the cause ... Fidel explained the reason for such an attitude to him: 'In your country the losses may be unnoticeable, but in our small country the human losses become known and have a great effect, therefore we are really trying to avoid losses in Angola.'" [p. 97]

After reading Shubin I reread the Cuban minutes of the February conversation; they include not one word about Cuban willingness – or unwillingness – to fight in Angola. This was Konstantin's only conversation with Castro during his trip to Havana. But more to the point – because I know that accounts of conversations can vary – Shubin should have put Konstantin's criticism of the Cubans in context. It is not that the Cubans did not want to fight but that they opposed Konstantin's strategy.

Shubin himself points to this, and drops it. Quoting from the notebooks, he writes that at a September 1984 meeting with Angolan President José Eduardo dos Santos and Head of the Cuban Military Mission General Polo Cintra Frías, Konstantin argued that the war in southeast Angola "had acquired 'a classical character.' ... Polo's position was quite the opposite, 'the war in Angola is not classical. It has a guerrilla character.'" (p. 102) This encapsulates the constant tug-of-war between the Cuban and the Soviet military missions in Angola. The Cubans favored small-unit tactics while Konstantin favored large sweeps, many brigades acting together in a major operation.

The most vigorous clash between the two military missions was over the proposed offensive against Savimbi's "capital" in the far southeast of Angola – a large bush camp with a few concrete structures. The offensive became Konstantin's *idée fixe*. The Cubans strongly opposed it. Even if successful, they argued, it would bring no important results: Savimbi's guerrillas would melt away, leaving the Angolan troops stranded in a sparsely populated region that lacked economic importance. Worse, the operation was bound to fail: it was foolhardy to launch a conventional operation so close to the Namibian border, where South Africa controlled the air. In 1984 President dos Santos rejected Konstantin's

plan. "Thus 'Polo' won this time," Shubin writes. (p. 102) The following year, however, Konstantin won, and the operation finally took place, over the Cubans' bitter opposition and without their participation. Shubin notes that the offensive was a devastating failure for the Angolans – the South Africans intervened and the Angolans suffered "a massive loss of arms and equipment" (p. 104) – but he fails to reflect on what the failure said about Konstantin's strategy; he fails to reflect on why the Cubans were reluctant to follow his lead. He fails to connect the dots.

Let me be clear: Konstantin's notebooks are an important source. They introduce the voice of an important protagonist, and they challenge every serious researcher to address the issues they raise. But the only way to address these issues is to compare the notebooks with other sources.

I do not fault Shubin for his failure to pry classified documents from the Russian archives or to claw his way into the closed Cuban archives – I know only too well how excruciatingly difficult this is. But lack of documents should have spurred him to talk with as many of the Angolan military leaders as possible. Had he done so, he would have realized how contested is Konstantin's account. For *The Hot 'Cold War'*, however, Shubin interviewed only one Angolan general, Ngongo, who was the Army's deputy chief of staff in the 1980s. Ngongo is an excellent source. On the two occasions I interviewed him he was forthcoming and straightforward, speaking freely about the mistakes of the Angolan High Command, his own mistakes, and Soviet and Cuban military policies in Angola. Shubin interviewed Ngongo five times, but the results are puzzling: Shubin does not use these interviews to shed any light on Konstantin's role in Angola, on the differences between Cuban and Soviet strategy, or any other of the controversial issues raised by Konstantin's notebooks.

The Hot "Cold War" is a useful, irritating, and deeply flawed book. Its central message is correct: the Soviet role in southern Africa was constructive. For over thirty years, Moscow lent crucial assistance to the liberation movements that fought against white rule in southern Africa. Some western countries – notably those of Scandinavia – gave these movements generous economic assistance and recognized the legitimacy of their struggle, but they drew the line at military aid, refusing to give weapons to those who fought, by their own reckoning, for freedom. Armed struggle was a key element in the collapse of white rule in southern Africa, and armed struggle would not have been possible without the weapons provided by the Soviet Union.

The Soviets' role was decisive in Angola, despite Konstantin's imperious manner and the wrongheaded strategy he urged on the Angolans. There is no need to belittle Cuba's role to arrive at this conclusion. In fact, an accurate history would examine the Soviet-Cuban relationship in southern Africa in all its complexity – its tensions and its harmonies. It is true, for example, that the Soviets staunchly opposed the offensive that the Cubans launched in 1988 that succeeded in forcing South Africa to withdraw from Angola and free Namibia. But it is also true that the offensive would not have been possible without

the Soviet Union. "The two great achievements of the USSR in Angola," argues Angolan Admiral Andres Mendes de Carvalho, "were to give the weapons to our army and aid to Cuba. The Cubans could not have remained in Angola without the Soviet aid."⁶ As Angolan President dos Santos told Fidel Castro in December 1988, "The Soviet Union helped Angola and helped Cuba to help Angola."⁷ This is a complex and fascinating story. Unfortunately, however, *The Hot "Cold War,"* relying on only Soviet sources, strips it of nuance, depth, and accuracy.

Piero Gleijeses is a professor of U.S. foreign policy at the Johns Hopkins University, SAIS. His most recent book is *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976* (University of North Carolina Press: rev. ed., 2003) and he is currently writing a book on U.S. and Cuban policy in southern Africa in the Carter and Reagan years.

Copyright © 2009 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.

⁶ Interview with Andres Mendes de Carvalho, Luanda, Nov. 29, 2007.

⁷ MemCon (Fidel Castro, dos Santos), Havana, Dec. 17, 1988, p. 12, Centro de Información de las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias.