

## ***Cuba and Angola: The War for Freedom***

Harry Villegas. 2017. Edited by Martín Koppel and Mary-Alice Waters. New York: Pathfinder Press

Representing a nationalist narrative, *Cuba and Angola* assesses Cuba's contribution to the freedom not only of Angola but other African countries from imperialistic attacks. It is a first-hand account of Cuba's military mission in Angola targeting "the political education of new generations of revolutionary combatants" (p. 22). This was one of Cuba's largest and longest internationalist missions which spanned from 1975 to 1991. The mission witnessed over 425,00 Cuban volunteers serving in Angola culminating in both the freedom of Angola and the strengthening of the Cuban revolution. The internationalist mission was named Operation Carlota reflecting Cuba's ties with Africa which dates back to the era of the slave trade. The book reflects a history of a small third world country that heeded the call for help from other third world countries in spite of limited resources.

Written in a novel style, the book has seven themes (chapters) and an introduction by editor Mary-Alice Waters. The introduction provides a brief background of what the book is all about including the methodology used. The first two

themes outline Cuba's presence and intervention in Angola, in terms of Cuba's internationalism, which dates back to the 1960s. Third, Cuba's intervention in 1975, which witnessed the defeat of South Africa's first invasion, is discussed. The book's fourth theme centers on the battle of Cangamba, which was the first major battle between Cuba and the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) on the one hand, and the National Union for the Total Independence of (UNITA) backed by South Africa and the United States on the other.

The experiences of Cangamba are explained in a way that would teach new revolutionaries steadfastness. The fifth theme discusses the battle of Cuito Cuanavale. It reflects that the victory of Cuba-MPLA was not only a victory against capitalism and imperialism but also represents the victory of the Cuban revolution. The defeat of South Africa during this battle also culminated in the independence of Namibia. Other international missions in Mozambique and

Ethiopia which were an extension of Cuban internationalism and solidarity with Africa are discussed in the sixth theme. The final theme focuses on Fidel Castro and praises his leadership skills, which were very critical for the success of Cuba's international mission and Cuban revolution. It was out of these themes that the author and the editors of the book weave a story that resonates well with the title of the book. Situated within the nationalist historiography, Villegas' book persuasively rejects and demystifies the popular perception that Cuba acted as a pawn of Soviet Union in Angola and elsewhere in Africa.

*Cuba and Angola* is a product of a combination of secondary sources (books and memoirs) and several interviews carried out between 2009 and 2016 by the editors of the book with Harry Villegas "Pombo", the author who was a participant in the Angolan mission. While these sources form one of the key strengths of the book because they "proved indispensable for understanding political and military events and verifying names, dates, and other facts" (p. 22), they are also part of its weaknesses. This is because the book "does not contain powerful eyewitness accounts of moments of combat and decisive battles in

Cangamba and Cuito Cuanavale among others" (p. 21). In the end, the book represents the official nationalist narrative. The voice and perceptions of the Angolans and even ordinary Cubans about Cuba's involvement in Angola are not represented. Consequently, Fidel Castro and what Cuba had done to Angola and other African countries is uncritically praised while the United States, South Africa, and UNITA are denigrated. At some points, Villegas exaggerates his facts, as for instance when he argues that people willingly joined the MPLA because they treated civilians with respect and some enemy soldiers would even surrender to them willingly since other forces committed atrocities (p. 46). This reviewer feels that it might not be logical to argue that it was only UNITA forces and their allies which were responsible for all the atrocities.

Overall, *Cuba and Angola* is a very fascinating book for those who are interested in studying Cuba's internationalist missions in Angola in particular and Africa in general. The book is indeed a welcome addition to the growing corpus of work on Cuba's internationalism and contribution to the freedom of Angola and other African countries fighting against imperialism and capitalism.

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