

Cuito Cuanavale: The battle that never was

Leopold Scholtz, *The SADF and Cuito Cuanavale: A Tactical and Strategic Analysis*

Delta Books, Johannesburg and Cape Town, 2020

280 pp

ISBN 978-1-9282-4803-3

R250.00 (approx.)

The South African Defence Force (SADF) fought three distinct wars during apartheid. The first war was fought against the African National Congress (ANC) insurgency within South Africa, with limited cross-border operations conducted by security force personnel into the neighbouring countries of Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Swaziland and Lesotho. These operations were directed largely against Umkhonto we Sizwe. The second war was the counterinsurgency war fought against the South-West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) in northern Namibia and Southern Angola. The SADF directed the mainstay of its operations in this war against the armed wing of SWAPO, the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN). This war is also more commonly referred to as the Border War. The third was the largely conventional war waged by the SADF against the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) Government and its armed forces, the People's Armed Forces of Liberation of Angola (FAPLA). The SADF became actively involved in this war in 1975 when it intervened in the unfolding Angolan Civil War. The South African involvement in this war had an explicit strategic defensive purpose, with the SADF providing open military support for the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) in the fight against FAPLA and their Cuban military allies within Angola. This war is more commonly referred to as the Bush War.

The historian Gary Baines cautions that war carries with it an inherent obligation of remembrance, as the residual effects of wars are known to impact societies long after the cessation of hostilities. The obligation to remember, however, comes with somewhat of a forewarning. More often than not, it is the "silence and disinterest" of the majority of society that sanctions a select "few" to record the collective past. In light of this, Baines recommends that the historian interested in the so-called broader War for Southern Africa, should engage critically with the unstable and dynamic power relationships that underpins the collective memory of this turbulent time. As such, two pertinent questions confront the researcher interested in South African military affairs during this period: who are the "few" sanctioned by society to record the collective military past? And, in which way do they record the military past and what are the dominant meanings that they ascribe to it?¹

1. G. Baines, *South Africa's "Border War": Contested Narratives and Conflicting Memories* (Bloomsbury: London, 2015), p 1.

The historiography surrounding the broader War for Southern Africa passed through five distinct phases that span the levels of war in their methodological approach. The five phases identified by Ian van der Waag and Deon Visser are: the so-called initial accounts, most of which are written by journalists; official, government sanctioned, histories; campaign or battlefield histories, usually compiled under government auspices; regimental histories, often written from within a particular unit; and personal accounts or memoirs. Each of these phases differ vastly from one another both in terms of who writes the history and what approach they follow.² The phases differ not only in their content and proximity to the various wars, but in the historiographical approaches of the authors associated with them. According to André Wessels, the vast majority of authors of “Border War” literature are amateur/popular historians or journalists. They often have no real historical training or background, display a distinct disregard for archival research, and their predominant focus is on writing for the commercial/popular markets in South Africa. As a mnemonic community, these authors mainly comprise of former national servicemen and retired generals, with only a small number of trained professional historians involved in studying the broader course of the war.³

Leopold Scholtz, a retired senior journalist, well-known political commentator, and former reserve force officer in the South African National Defence Force, falls into the latter category. In his recent publication *The SADF and Cuito Cuanavale: A Tactical and Strategic Analysis*, Scholtz provides a fresh perspective on one of the more contentious episodes of the War for Southern Africa. His book refocuses historical attention on the series of battles that were fought between the SADF, FAPLA and the Cubans in South-Eastern Angola during 1987 and 1988. To the uninformed, or politically-minded, as Scholtz points out, these battles are still commonly referred to as the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale.

The book comprises twelve key chapters, in which Scholtz provides an unparalleled analysis of the South African military involvement in South-Eastern Angola during the final stages of the so-called Bush War. Throughout the narrative, Scholtz demonstrates the role that Cuito Cuanavale played in the development of the SADF’s strategic, operational and tactical planning throughout the course of 1987 and 1988 as the geo-strategic situation in South-Eastern Angola deteriorated.

Apart from a few haphazard suggestions and plans to occupy the town at the beginning of 1987, the SADF approach towards operations around Cuito Cuanavale evolved throughout the period. At first, the occupation of the town played no role in the SADF’s planning during Operation Moduler – their main aim was simply to halt the FAPLA advance on the UNITA stronghold at Mavinga. Once the FAPLA offensive had

-
2. I.J. van der Waag, and G.E. Visser, “War, Popular Memory and the South African Literature of the Angolan Conflict”, *Journal for Contemporary History*, 34, 1, 2009, pp 115–140.
 3. A. Wessels, “Half a Century of South African ‘Border War’ Literature: A Historiographical Exploration”, *Journal for Contemporary History*, 42, 2, 2017, p 42.

been halted after the Battle of the Lomba, senior SADF officers started debating the idea to occupy Cuito Cuanavale. For a fleeting moment the idea was considered, especially after P.W. Botha gave his blessing for a counteroffensive towards the end of September 1987. Such an operation would, however, have entailed an operational envelopment of Cuito Cuanavale from the west of the Cuito River, which in turn would have cut off the FAPLA forces to the east of the river. In hindsight, and as Scholtz correctly points out, the occupation of Cuito Cuanavale was never a strategic consideration for the SADF – instead, their interest in the town was purely tactical. An operation west of the river would, however, in all likelihood, have brought a rapid end to the campaign. But this was not to be.

The South African defence planners opted instead for a series of offensive operations east of the Cuito River, where the aim was to destroy the FAPLA forces and push them back across the river to Cuito Cuanavale. As a result, Operations Hooper and Packer held very mixed results for the SADF. The highly mobile battles fought around the Chaminga River were initially very successful for the SADF, largely due to favourable terrain and, more importantly, the South African penchant for manoeuvre warfare. During the penultimate battles fought between the SADF and FAPLA in the vicinity of the Tumpo Triangle in 1988, the South Africans were given a bloody nose by the Angolans and their Cuban allies on three different occasions. Forced to fight in unfavourable terrain, the battles of attrition in the Tumpo Triangle gradually wore down the SADF forces in South-Eastern Angola.

Scholtz undoubtedly accepted Baines's aforementioned challenge, by critically engaging with the unstable and dynamic power relationships that underpins the collective memory of this turbulent time – especially surrounding the so-called Battle of Cuito Cuanavale. He also unceremoniously takes to task the “few” sanctioned by society to record the collective military past, and challenges the dominant, and often misconstrued, meanings ascribed to the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale. In this regard, he contests the viewpoints expressed by Fidel Castro, Gary Baines, Vladimir Shubin, Ian Liebenberg, Hedelberto López Blanch as well as Piero Gleijeses. As such, Scholtz's narrative definitely challenges the liberal pro-Angolan and Cuban versions of history – which, he contends, is nothing more than political drivel at times. These authors also continue to emphasise that the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale did in fact occur, while the prevailing evidence presented by Scholtz in his book all but debunks this myth.

In general, Scholtz's book is a welcome addition to the burgeoning literature on the War for Southern Africa, and provides a much-needed new lens of analysis. His book is very well researched, and throughout the manuscript his arguments are supported by a myriad of primary archival material gleaned from Department of Defence (DOD) Archives located in Pretoria, South Africa. His source base is further supplemented by some interviews he conducted with key South African role-players, as well as a wide range of secondary material.

That being said, the book has some rather apparent shortcomings. First, I would contend that the book provides an operational rather than a strategic and tactical analysis of the so-called Battle of Cuito Cuanavale. Second, the book contains too few maps. In a manuscript riddled with detailed descriptions of operational movements, formations and battles, the reader is forced to page back and forth to find a suitable map which provides the necessary context. Third, the chapter titled "Tactical Analysis" is rather superfluous for an academic debate, but would of course be welcomed by the general readership – especially the numerous South African armchair generals. Last, Scholtz's assertion that he has seen all the archival material detailing the so-called Battle of Cuito Cuanavale is problematic. While he must be commended for his archival work, a careful investigation of his bibliography reveals that he only consulted a select number of files from all but three archival groups. This is definitely not "all" of the archives, particularly since recent statistics suggests that at least 80% of the archival material housed by the DOD Archives remains classified. Surprisingly, the majority of this archival material covers the War for Southern Africa.⁴ Scholtz should know better than to make such assertions.

Nevertheless, his book comes highly recommended, and can definitely be considered for inclusion in university course material that focuses on the broader War for Southern Africa. The final word on the ever-contentious Battle of Cuito Cuanavale and the broader War for Southern Africa is, however, yet to be written due to the vast amount of untapped archival sources in South Africa and further afield. For a start, I would propose that we start talking about the Cuito Cuanavale Campaign – but, then again, you have the right to disagree with me.

Evert Kleynhans
Stellenbosch University

4. For a detailed breakdown of the archival material available at the DOD Archives to researchers interested in the broader War for Southern Africa, see E.P. Kleynhans, and H.W. Gordon, "Legislative Disconnect or Institutional Gatekeeping? Challenges of Researching South Africa's Military Past", *Scientia Militaria*, 48, 1, 2020, pp 97–114.