

 **Article REVIEW**

**Piero Gleijeses.** “Moscow’s Proxy? Cuba and Africa 1975-1988,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8:2 (Spring 2006): 3-51. doi:10.1162/jcws.2006.8.2.3. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2006.8.2.3>.<sup>1</sup>

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*The Chronology of the Angolan War in September-November, 1976*

**P**iero Gleijeses has written an impressive book on Cuban, U.S., and Soviet engagement in Africa in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Through the article in this issue, Gleijeses further extends his manifold contributions to shed light on this tangle of relations, reaching the end of the Cold War.

On one key issue, however, Gleijeses has obscured rather than clarified the record: What was the sequence of actions between September and November 1975, when the war in Angola escalated and tens of thousands of foreign troops poured into that country? In his article in this issue, Gleijeses gives us the following chronology: “On 14 October [1975], South African troops invaded Angola, transforming the civil war into an international conflict. As the South Africans raced toward Luanda, MPLA resistance crumbled. The South Africans would have seized the city if Castro had not decided, on 4 November, to send troops in response to the MPLA’s desperate appeals.” (6) In short, South Africa invaded, the MPLA asked for support, and then the Cuban forces arrived.

And yet, that is not how it happened. Indeed, Gleijeses’ book is a tribute to the alternative proposition that the sequence was different. Since the early 1960s, Cuba had become active in Africa, as Gleijeses very ably shows, deploying troops to the Algerian-Morocco war in 1963, Ernesto (Che) Guevara with some two hundred Cuban fighters to eastern Zaire (as today’s Democratic Republic of the Congo was called then) two years later, and other small-scale Cuban forces elsewhere. For its part, South Africa engaged in various activities that sought to bolster its allies and defeat its foes in southern Africa. The United States, especially, and the Soviet Union and China to some extent, were involved in various ways in this very complex story on the African continent. The Cuban engagement, Gleijeses also shows, was noticed the least, albeit not ignored. The Cuban involvement specifically in Angola began also, Gleijeses tells us, a decade before the war decisions in 1975.

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<sup>1</sup> A revised version of Piero Gleijeses’s article appears in the *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8.4 (Fall 2006), doi:10.1162/jcws.2006.8.4.98, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2006.8.4.98>. According to the Editor’s Note by Mark Kramer in *JCWS* 8.4, “The final article, by Piero Gleijeses, is a revised version of the article he published in the Spring 2006 issue. [...] The substance of the article is unchanged from the earlier version.” This note is available via doi:10.1162/jcws.2006.8.4.1, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2006.8.4.1>.

An H-Diplo review by Nancy Mitchell of the revised Gleijeses article in *JCWS* 8.4, published on 16 February 2007 is available via <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/jcws/jcws2006.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

For this note, I rely on the account of Cuba's Angola decision that most closely reflected the views of Prime Minister Fidel Castro and other Cuban leaders at the time when the decisions were made. This source is an article that Nobel Prize winner Gabriel García Márquez published in several venues in 1976 and 1977. I work mainly from the English-language version that was published in Havana because it was published under Cuban government auspices.<sup>3</sup> García Márquez has long been a personal friend of Fidel Castro; García Márquez would not have gotten the information for his article unless Castro gave it to him or authorized his staff to do so.

In mid-1975, Cuba sent Major<sup>4</sup> Raúl Díaz Argüelles as its advance officer to Angola. Fidel Castro's key decisions to deploy significant forces to Angola were made in the late summer of 1975 in response to Díaz Argüelles' recommendations, which led to Cuban actions that exceeded the requests of MPLA leader Agostinho Neto. Díaz Argüelles was not an alarmist: South African troops had crossed Angola's southern border on 5 August, a key moment in the story of escalation toward war.

In late July, Neto had not yet asked for Cuban forces, yet Cuban leaders, assessing the threats to the MPLA, decided to send a contingent of 480 Cuban military specialists. They left Cuba in late September 1975 and traveled aboard three Cuban ships, which docked at Angolan ports on October 4, 7, and 11, respectively. That is, the first Cuban ship arrived ten days before Gleijeses' date for the large-scale South African military invasion of Angola (recalling that a first, limited invasion had already occurred on 5 August) and all three had arrived before 14 October.

Oddly enough, nearly identical information appears in Gleijeses' book on page 265, though the dates of the arrival of the ships differ slightly from García Márquez's. In that chapter of his book, Gleijeses disputes that Cuban "specialists" ("especialistas" in Spanish, both words from the García Márquez texts) were troops. It is a somewhat arcane debate whether they should or should not be called troops but, in any event, I have simply called them "military instructors and other military personnel," as Gleijeses quotes me in his article's footnote 7. More importantly, the empirical chronology for Cuban deployments in late September and early October 1975 has little impact on Gleijeses' argument in his book; it disappears altogether from the account in his article in this issue.

Most analysts would not be surprised, however, at a characterization of the Angolan events in the second half of 1975 as a "classic action-reaction process of escalation," which is also a phrase of mine that Gleijeses reports. The South African and the U.S. governments may have been wrong, under- and uninformed about many important questions, and often obtuse but they were not utterly blind to events. Cuba had been a player in African international and domestic affairs for years before 1975. Suppose one ignores all of that and sticks just to 1975. It is reasonable to call a classic action-reaction process of escalation a set of events that features a South African limited invasion in early August, a deployment of hundreds of Cuban military specialists in early October, a South African invasion following in that same month, and then an even larger Cuban military deployment in November and thereafter. Arguably, García Márquez wrote as he did, with emphasis on dates and events on the ground, because both he and

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<sup>3</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, "Operation Carlota," *Tricontinental Bimonthly*, no. 53 (1977): 4-25. A version of this article was also published by *Proceso* magazine in Mexico in 1976 and by Mosca Azul Editores in Lima in 1977.

<sup>4</sup> By international standards, his military title at the time would correspond to a one-star General.

high-ranking Cuban leaders thought in similar terms, that is, Cuba acted and reacted in escalatory correspondence with South African (and U.S.) actions.

Few leaders seek to engage in escalation because such processes add little to security, often detract from it, and invariably increase costs. Intentionality is one but only one of the components of a process of escalation: no leader intends to provoke the adversary to escalate even further. Analysts, however, should have much less difficulty recognizing a pattern of escalation from the events on the ground. The sources of the pattern are often disjointed. Decision makers are rarely fully aware of the entire array of actions that their adversaries undertake until some later time. Decisions often have unanticipated consequences. And, yes, decision makers are “unnerved” when they discover what they had not anticipated. Truncated account of escalation processes, as Gleijeses presents in this article, obscure more than clarify. His book, this article, and all of us, his readers who are so much in his debt for his splendid work, would have been better served analytically by more systematic attention to the action-reaction processes of escalation in the Angolan war.

To affirm that Cuba played a proactive, not merely a reactive, role within a process of escalation does not prevent me, or anyone, from agreeing fully with Gleijeses’ conclusion in this article: “Any fair assessment of Cuba’s policy in Africa must recognize its impressive successes, and particularly its role in changing the course of southern African history despite Washington’s best efforts to stop it.” (50)

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