



Article REVIEW

Discussion & Dialogue

Piero Gleijeses. "Moscow's Proxy? Cuba and Africa, 1975-1988." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8.4 (Fall 2006).

Reviewed by **Nancy Mitchell**, North Carolina State University
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The following entries are selected postings from the H-Diplo list discussion on Mitchell's review of Gleijeses. Included are two replies by the article author, Piero Gleijeses, as well as comments from James McAllister, Elaine Windrich, Nancy Mitchell (the reviewer), and O.A. Westad. These entries are presented in chronological order based on the date and time of original posting.

James McAllister, Williams College, James.McAllister@williams.edu
Posted to H-Diplo on Monday, 19 February 2007 02:42:35 -0000

Nancy Mitchell's review of Piero Gleijeses' article on Cuban foreign policy in the *Journal of Cold War Studies* raises some troubling issues for diplomatic historians. However, I think what is troubling is the exact opposite of what she suggests. First, she starts out by arguing that "the narratives that are deemed important are those that buttress the story of the Empire's rise to greater and greater power. Anything else is 'too trivial' for history to remember. It is difficult to buck this trend." Her concluding sentence thanks Gleijeses for his work because "thanks to him the Cuban contribution to the liberation of southern Africa has not been conveniently airbrushed out of history."

I am not sure who is doing the "airbrushing" or who is responsible for deeming certain narratives important, but can this view even remotely reflect the field of diplomatic/international history at any point since at least the Vietnam War? Critics of American foreign policy or the American empire may be right or wrong in given circumstances, but the idea that their works are being ignored in favor of narratives that buttress or glorify the rise of American power is impossible to sustain. As Mitchell herself notes, "Certainly, diplomatic historians have written stinging critiques of U.S. policy, but the United States remains the dominant player." Anyone who follows the field of diplomatic history knows full well that "stinging critiques" are far more prevalent than those that "buttress the story of the Empire's rise to greater and greater power." In short, I disagree with the image of the field of diplomatic history implied by Mitchell. If her argument is that political elites and not diplomatic historians are the ones doing the airbrushing, I would still disagree. As she herself shows, President Carter himself believes in the "idealistic" motives of Cuban foreign policy and Henry Kissinger too (belatedly, to be sure) now shares the same view of Castro's foreign policy (he was a true revolutionary) that she believes is correct.

It should also be noted in this connection that the argument that "Cuba was definitely not Moscow's proxy in Angola" is not exactly a controversial or radical one. In what is very much a mainstream history, Raymond Garthoff's *Detente and Confrontation* (1985), the author sums up what he believes to be the historical consensus at that time: "Most students of the Angolan War have concluded that Cuba acted on its own, but as an ally of the Soviet Union and in consultation with it. There is no evidence that the Soviet leaders applied any pressure on Cuba, and there are many indications, apart from the claims of Castro and other Cuban officials, of Cuban initiative. The Soviets clearly decided at least to support the Cuban assistance; what is unknown but doubtful, is that they urged it (p.514)." It is unclear to me who in particular is arguing for a different view of Cuba's role in Angola during the 1970's.

I am not a specialist or even very interested in American-Cuban relations, but what strikes me as controversial about Gleijeses' scholarship are his claims about the unique morality of Cuban foreign policy. The claim that Castro was not a puppet and that he sometimes or even often acted autonomously of the Soviet Union is not a pathbreaking conclusion and it does not appear to be outside of the mainstream of the historical consensus. Castro was not a puppet of the Soviet Union in exactly the same way that Ngo Dinh Diem was not a puppet of the United States. The argument that client states of the superpowers often acted independently is certainly not unique to Castro's Cuba and I think that diplomatic historians rarely find puppets whenever they look closely at alliance relations during the Cold War.

I could not agree more with Nancy Mitchell that Professor Piero Gleijeses's article is a very important contribution, one I would assign to students enthusiastically. All diplomatic historians should be thankful for the documents that he has made available to others. However, I disagree with her suspicion that historians will want more documentation because he is making "provocative assertions" about the nature of Cuban foreign policy. This might be true--and obviously we should want more documentation for provocative assertions than bland ones--but because of the inherent and real problems of equal access to archives. As she notes, Professor Gleijeses is the only scholar to have gained access to closed Cuban archives. Even if Cuba was a model democracy, I think historians would and should be cautious about accepting the validity of evidence that is available to only one scholar and which cannot be verified by any other scholars. Of course, Cuba is far from a model democracy and its abstract commitment to the truth and toleration of opposing views is questionable; a point that I think is hardly contestable regardless of your political orientation. What all historians should want is not for Professor Gleijeses to provide more voluminous supporting documentation, but for open and unfettered access to Cuban archives for all historians for this and other periods. If the documentation supports the positive view of Cuban foreign policy, all to the good. If this were the case, it seems to me that the Cuban government should be offering to make their archives available to all. But until then, I think that historians need to be skeptical and resist being easily persuaded when they do not have equal access to the Cuban archives. Even after Professor Gleijeses publishes all of the documents he uses in his article, as he has generously promised to do after the publication of his book, historians will still properly wonder about the documents he was potentially not permitted to see by the Cuban government.

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Posted to H-Diplo on Monday, 19 February 2007, 02:47:57 -0000

I certainly agree with the reviewer that the Gleijeses article in *Journal of Cold War Studies* (and also his book *Conflicting Missions* which preceded it) were, as she says, an "upsetting of the applecart". At least it was for those who "generally depicted [Cuba] as a client of the Soviet Union or as a thorn in America's side". But anyone who had studied southern Africa and had not been taken in by the Cold War propaganda emanating from apartheid South Africa and its apologists in the West would recognize this for what it was, just that.

A few other misunderstandings should be mentioned as well:

1) there was not "an unexpected intervention of 36,000 Cuban troops in Angola in 1975-76". There didn't need to be after South Africa had been driven out of Angola by at most 12,000 Cuban soldiers aligned with the MPLA troops, FAPLA.

2) There is no evidence to suggest that Angola "had a habit of treating its patron rather shabbily", especially when the MPLA government would have collapsed without them, even though their leader may have been a bit difficult to deal with.

3) To quote Kissinger as a fount of knowledge on Cuba's "fraternal ties" with the rebels in Angola is indeed ironic, especially after he had told a Congressional hearing that he only ordered US intervention on the side of South Africa and its Angolan puppets (UNITA and the FNLA) because the Soviet Union backed the MPLA and he didn't want them to "win" a Cold War victory.

4) If the Carter administration feared Cuban intervention in Rhodesia, so did Kissinger before them. That accounts for his overnight conversion to African majority rule following his fiasco in Angola, which led him on an abortive shuttle diplomacy mission which only confirmed his ignorance of the region. But if the Carter administration also had this fear, then it was totally misplaced because Rhodesia was a British colony in which the Cubans never set foot and, unlike Angola, had no history of Cuban support for its liberation forces, ZANU and ZAPU.

In fact, Gleijeses's work should be welcomed for not only "upsetting the applecart" but also for overturning decades of Cold War diplomatic history which was on this subject quite simply wrong. And if, as the reviewer says, "there will remain some readers who will never be persuaded", then they can be relegated to the category of other denials, however overwhelming the evidence is.

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Posted to H-Diplo on Monday, 19 February 2007, 16:20:04 -0000

I would like to reply to James McAllister's question about one of the key points of Mitchell's review of my "Moscow's Proxy." McAllister doubts that my conclusions in this article or in *Conflicting Missions* are controversial. He writes: "I am not sure who is doing the 'airbrushing' or who is responsible for deeming certain narratives important ... It should also be noted in this

connection that the argument that ‘Cuba was definitely not Moscow's proxy in Angola’ is not exactly a controversial or radical one. ... I disagree with her suspicion that historians will want more documentation because he is making ‘provocative assertions’ about the nature of Cuban foreign policy.”

McAllister’s optimism is simplistic. I have discovered – often to my surprise – that Mitchell is precisely right: seeing Cuba as an independent and important actor is not yet widely accepted.

Let me give one important and revealing example: Odd Arne Westad’s recent book, *The Global Cold War*. I choose this example because Dr. Westad is a first-rate scholar, he cannot by any stretch of imagination be accused of being an ideologue of the right or the left, and his book is, in most regards, excellent. It won the Bancroft prize. However, on a key aspect of the dispatch of 36,000 Cubans soldiers to Angola between early November 1975 through early April 1976 (note to Windrich: the 36,000 figure is consistently given in Cuban documents), Westad backslides.

It is necessary to get into the details here. Bear with me.

Westad writes that "Soviet, Cuban, Western, and South African information gives conflicting versions of the Cuban build-up of troops in Angola." He notes, correctly, that "Cuban sources claim that up to late December ... all transport had taken place on Cuban ships and aircraft." (To be more exact, he should have said “up to January 9, 1976.”) He notes that "Soviet archival documents give a different story, which is – at least in part – corroborated by information from other countries." (pp. 234-36) However, in the relevant footnote he only cites one Soviet document – a March 1, 1976 report by the Soviet chargé in Luanda. He fails to identify "the information from other countries" that corroborates "at least in part" the Soviet "documents." Even though he has claimed that South African documents give "a different account" he does not cite any. Most intriguing is Westad's mention of "Western ... information." While he never explains what this information is, or cites it, it is true that the US government has declassified many US documents about the Cuban airlift which US intelligence services followed very closely. These reports, however, completely support the Cuban version – to wit, that the first Soviet logistical support for the transportation of Cuban troops to Angola was provided on January 9, 1976. Finally, forgetting his own earlier warning that there are conflicting versions, Westad concludes, apparently on the basis of his one Soviet document, that between November 1975 and mid-January 1976 the Soviets transported "more than twelve thousand soldiers from Cuba to Angola."

This matters. What Westad is saying is that despite the evidence in US archives and despite the evidence in Cuban archives that I detailed in *Conflicting Missions* and made available to scholars in the SAIS library – that is, despite literally scores of documents that agree that the Cubans mounted the airlift on their own from November until January – that in fact the Soviets mounted the airlift. The thrust of this argument is that the Soviets supported the Cuban airlift of troops to Angola from the beginning. The truth is that the Soviets were surprised and angered by Castro’s decision.

I cite this example not to single out Westad, but to indicate how tempting and easy it is to reestablish what I have called elsewhere “comforting myths.”

Nancy Mitchell, North Carolina State University, nancy_mitchell@ncsu.edu

Posted to H-Diplo on Monday, 19 February 2007, 22:16:19 -0000

I appreciate the spirited responses of Elaine Windrich and James McAllister to my comments on Gleijeses' "Moscow's Proxy."

I would like to respond to two of Windrich's points and offer a brief comment on McAllister's remarks about the Cuban archives.

1. Contrary to Windrich's assertion, there is indeed evidence that suggests that Angola "had a habit of treating its patron rather shabbily." Gleijeses cites an important instance: the Angolan government negotiated the Lusaka agreement without consulting the Cubans, despite the fact that they had signed the 1978 bilateral military agreement in which they pledged to confer with the Cubans "before making decisions or taking actions in the military arena." (p. 123) Moreover, my research shows clearly that during the Carter years the Angolan government had talks with American officials about the possibility of normalizing relations; despite the fact that Cubans were literally dying for the MPLA government, Luanda did not inform Havana of these forays with Washington.

2. In early 1977 the Cubans, Soviets, and Angolans established a major training camp in Boma (Angola) for ZAPU forces. By 1978 it was operating at full capacity – training 6000 ZAPU guerrillas at a time. The Soviets provided the arms, the Angolans the location, and the Cubans the instructors; the Cubans helped the guerrillas return to Zambia after their training was completed. In his memoirs, Nkomo extols the Cuban training. (*Nkomo, the story of my life*, p. 177) The fact that, as Windrich writes, "Rhodesia was a British colony in which the Cubans never set foot" is irrelevant. The key point is that the Rhodesian military was launching increasingly punishing raids into Mozambique and Zambia, and both Kaunda and Machel said that they might be forced to call – however reluctantly – on Cuban forces to protect their countries. US documents show clearly that the Carter administration took very seriously the possibility that this could lead to a "second Angola" in Rhodesia. (See my forthcoming article, "Tropes of the Cold War," *Cold War History*.)

3. I share McAllister's desire that the Cubans open their archives, but I also wish – even more fervently – that the US government would open its archives. The fact that the Cuban archives for the late 1970s and 1980s are available to one researcher is, sadly, more than we can say about the US Department of State and CIA archives for the same period – FOIA, the presidential libraries, and the National Security Archive notwithstanding. While the situation is not as dire for researchers in US archives for the pre-1975 period, it is certainly not just in the Cuban archives that historians have to "wonder about the documents" we have not been "permitted to see."

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Posted to H-Diplo on Mon, 19 Feb 2007 22:50:07 -0000

Piero Gleijeses has contributed more to our understanding of Cuban foreign policy toward the Third World than most other scholars put together, and his book on Cuba in Africa is a real breakthrough, which has enlightened and stimulated the scholarship of others, my own included.

I don't think there is much disagreement between Dr Gleijeses and myself with regard to seeing Cuba as an independent or important actor as far as the intervention in Angola is concerned. Our difference is in terms of the timing for Soviet support for the Cuban operation, which I -- based on Soviet material -- tend to see as coming earlier than what Dr Gleijeses has found. The problem here, for both of us, is the lack of full access to archives in Moscow and Havana. I had some very limited access to the files of the International Department of the CPSU Central Committee on Angola when I did my research in Moscow in the mid-1990s, and my requests to see the same material later have been declined. When I requested access to the Cuban material during a trip to Havana in April 2006 this was declined in toto. The Soviet report from Luanda from 1 March 1976 is important, but I am fully willing to accept that the jury is out on the exact timing and content of Soviet support until the relevant archives in Havana, Moscow, and - for that matter - Luanda and Pretoria, are open to scholars.

In terms of the long-term effects of the Cuban intervention, however, Piero Gleijeses and I agree in full. It is difficult to imagine the collapse of the South African apartheid state without the Cuban willingness to support the MPLA regime in Angola. In this sense the exact nature of the Soviet-Cuban cooperation is of less importance than the overall historical picture that both Dr Gleijeses and I are preoccupied with.

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Posted to H-Diplo on Wed, 21 Feb 2007 02:51:34 -0000

I appreciate Arne Westad's gracious reply. He is right that on the large issues we are in agreement. But the timing of Soviet support for the airlift is not a minor detail because it provides the most important and the clearest evidence of the independence of the Cuban decision to send troops to Angola and of the reluctance of the Kremlin to support it.

That is why I must underline the paradox of his reply, and of the relevant section of his *The Global Cold War*: Professor Westad appears to give one Soviet document -- written after the fact by a *chargé* in Luanda -- equal weight with literally scores of US and Cuban documents about the airlift that were written contemporaneously with it. In multi-archival research on this point, I thought I had hit pay dirt: day-by-day accounts of the same operation from two sources that were sworn enemies and that agree on every significant detail.

As someone who has spent, literally, years of my life prying open the Cuban archives and combing through all the available US (and relevant European) archives, I find Westad's dismissal of this evidence -- cited in *Conflicting Missions* -- frustrating. I placed all the Cuban documents in the library at SAIS for eighteen months. All the relevant US documents have been declassified for over a decade; I am very puzzled that Dr. Westad does not cite them.

I accept that there is a problem with closed archives, as well as with the "open" US archives (as Mitchell indicated in her reply to McAllister), and I accept that research is almost always provisional, but I do not accept that "the jury is still out" on the timing of Soviet support for the airlift. I do not accept that one stray Soviet document (which I hope Westad will make available to researchers) can throw all these dovetailing US and Cuban documents into question. If it can, then I throw my hands up in despair. How many documents do I need -- from how many archives -- to establish the point?

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