

 **Article REVIEW**

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

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As I read Piero Gleijeses’ essay “Moscow’s Proxy? Cuba and Africa, 1975-1988,” I kept thinking of a moment in J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* when the protagonist unleashes his fury at the Colonel, who represents the Empire. (Coetzee does not specify what Empire he is describing.)

“You are the enemy, Colonel!” I can restrain myself no longer. I pound the desk with my fist. “You are the enemy, you have made the war, and you have given them [the ‘barbarians’] all the martyrs they need. ... History will bear me out!”

“Nonsense. There will be no history, the affair is too trivial.”

—J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Penguin, 1980, 110

The colonel speaks with the absolute confidence of the powerful: “There will be no history.” And he is right: 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. Certainly, diplomatic historians have written stinging critiques of U.S. policy – but the United States remains the dominant player. Gleijeses’ upsetting of the applecart is much more profound and challenging. In “Moscow’s Proxy,” as in his earlier book, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976* (Chapel Hill, 2002), which lays the foundation for this article, Gleijeses casts Cuba – a small island that is generally depicted as a client of the Soviet Union or as a thorn in America’s side – as an autonomous and powerful actor on the global scene.

The affront to one’s established ordering of the world is startling. It reminds me of going to Google Earth and playing with the compass: it is simultaneously fascinating and disturbing.

In this essay, Gleijeses offers a broad overview of Cuba’s major activities in Africa after the unexpected intervention of 36,000 Cuban troops in Angola in 1975/76. After a concise recap of the initial Angolan intervention (which is covered at length in *Conflicting Missions*), he focuses on the continuing presence of Cuban troops in Angola, peaking at 52,000 soldiers in 1988, and on the Cuban intervention in Ethiopia in 1978 with 12,000 troops. As in his previous work, Gleijeses also stresses the nonmilitary aid

that Cuba extended to Africa – technical assistance, medical care, and scholarships in Cuba.

While describing Cuban activities and, afterwards, in his subtle analysis of them, Gleijeses raises many important points.

First, he conveys a Cuba that was autonomous, reluctant to project its military power, and respectful toward its African “clients.”

He argues that Cuba was definitely not Moscow’s proxy in Angola or, although the evidence is incomplete, in Ethiopia. While Moscow’s support made Havana’s activism in Africa possible, Castro was not the Kremlin’s puppet.

Sending Cuban troops to Angola entailed real risks for Castro – that the Kremlin would refuse to support them and that the South Africans would escalate; and sending troops to Ethiopia spelled the death of the nascent rapprochement with the Carter administration. Moreover, these military adventures stretched the island’s resources. Gleijeses cites documents in which the Cubans poignantly wrestle with how to respond to the requests of the leaders of both Angola and Ethiopia for more troops. He also persuasively debunks the canard that Havana reaped any financial gain: the Cuban soldiers were not mercenaries.

Gleijeses concludes that realpolitik cannot explain Castro’s actions. Nor can a simple recourse to Castro’s ego. Gleijeses does not deny that Castro has an ego, but he does cite long conversations between Castro and the Angolan president that convey, in riveting detail, how patient and generous the Cuban leader could be – even toward a government that depended on Cuban troops for its survival and had a habit of treating its patron rather shabbily.

The only explanation of Castro’s motivations that makes sense is the one that Henry Kissinger himself belatedly espoused: Castro was a true revolutionary. He was motivated by “idealism” -- particularly by the desire to defeat the forces of apartheid in southern Africa. As President Carter told me, “Castro had to make a decision between normal relations with the United States of America, which was an attractive prize, and his heartfelt obligations to struggling people in Africa.”¹

It is therefore particularly significant that according to Gleijeses’ careful account of “the balance sheet,” the primary beneficiaries of Castro’s policies were the southern Africans who were oppressed by white regimes – in Angola (before 1975), Rhodesia, Namibia, and South Africa. Cuban troops defended Angola for thirteen years (1975 -1988) from the bruising incursions from the South Africans; in 1987 the Cubans finally managed to gain air superiority in southern Angola which gave Havana the power to twist Pretoria’s arm at the negotiating table. In 1988 South Africa finally withdrew its troops from Angola and Namibia. Moreover, as Gleijeses asserts, and my research details (see Nancy Mitchell, “Tropes of the Cold War: Jimmy Carter and Rhodesia, *Cold War History*,

¹ Author’s interview with Jimmy Carter, Atlanta, Georgia, May 23, 2002.

forthcoming) it was fear of Cuban intervention that helped keep the Carter administration's attention riveted on bringing peace to Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). In South Africa, the Cuban victories not only gave the ANC a psychological boost; they also helped to establish a ring of black ruled states surrounding an increasingly isolated Pretoria.

Gleijeses' conclusions not only place Cuba in a positive light, they also turn the premises of political realism on their head: first, the superpowers did not control the international system, and second, not all states are motivated by *realpolitik*. This makes the world – and the role of the historian – much more complex. It therefore encounters great resistance.

This is why Gleijeses' documentation is of paramount importance. As is by now widely known, he is the *only* scholar to have gained access to the closed Cuban archives. And this article indicates that his access has deepened in the interval after writing *Conflicting Missions*. While the extent of his Cuban documentation was very impressive then, it is more so now: he has more documents that have been written by Castro – to commanders in the field and to the Soviet leaders. As before, he has also combed thoroughly through U.S. and European archives, and he has interviewed protagonists. When he has been unable to gather sufficient evidence to be conclusive – as in the case of the decision to send troops to Ethiopia – he says so forthrightly.

Nevertheless, I suspect that because Gleijeses is making provocative assertions some readers will want even more voluminous supporting documentation. Certainly his forthcoming book, which will expand the terrain of this essay, will offer more evidence. But there will remain some readers who will never be persuaded.

Gleijeses conveys new information – much of his account of Havana's policies was previously unknown – and he profoundly complicates our view of the world during the Cold War. This is an important and provocative article about a little known aspect of Cold War history. Gleijeses shows that the affair was not “too trivial” to be told; thanks to him the Cuban contribution to the liberation of southern Africa has not been conveniently airbrushed out of history.

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