

CUBA'S ROLE IN AFRICA: REVOLUTIONARY OR REACTIONARY?

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On September 12, 1978, the featured guest at Ethiopian celebrations of the fourth anniversary of the overthrow of the regime of Emperor Haile Selassie, was the prime minister of Cuba, Fidel Castro. The hero's treatment accorded him in a country where 17,000 Cuban troops are stationed, and his meeting while there with the leaders of Zimbabwe's Patriotic Front, Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo, epitomized the growing concern, or approbation, depending on one's viewpoint, over the role of this small Caribbean nation in the African continent.

In proportion to its population, Cuba has more of its sons and daughters stationed in trouble spots in Africa than the U.S. had in Vietnam at the height of its involvement. Cuba is present in seventeen African countries, although her presence in Angola and Ethiopia is of greatest importance.¹ This widespread Cuban military presence and intervention in Africa needs a thorough assessment. Cuban foreign policy in Africa is closely related to both Cuban domestic politics and to its close relationship with its principal ally—the Soviet Union—and hence to super-power politics. In this article I will first set out to review the evolution of Cuban foreign policy and practice in general and examine in detail its African dimensions. Second, I will look at stimuli and rationale underlying Cuban involvement in Africa and, third, examine conflicting views on Cuba's domestic situation with an eye to possible linkages between domestic and foreign policies. In the fourth section I will attempt a thorough assessment of the pros and cons of Cuba's African involvement.

When Fidel Castro ousted Batista's regime in January 1959, only nine African countries had achieved their independence. In that year Che Guevara, the new government's principal theoretician, undertook his first Afro-Asian tour, meeting leaders of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) in Cairo. But the first high level institutional contacts between Cuba and Africa were established at the first conference of heads of state or government of nonaligned countries in Belgrade in 1961. Che visited Algeria in 1963 and with a few Cuban soldiers aided Algeria in its brief border war with Morocco. Revolutionary leaders from Africa were made welcome in Havana as soon as the new government took over. Many

Zanzibaris who had military training there, for example, participated in the Zanzibar revolution in January 1964. Che Guevara returned to Africa again in that year and met the leaders of the liberation movements in Portuguese territories—Eduardo Mondlane, Amílcar Cabral, and Agostinho Neto. He established ties with CONCP (Conference of Nationalist Organizations of the Portuguese Colonies), composed of the three parties headed by these leaders, FRELIMO (The Mozambique Liberation Front), PAIGC (The African Party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde), and MPLA (The People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola), as well as their close associates in ANC (African National Congress—South Africa), SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organization), and ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People's Union), all multiracial in orientation. Later that year and into 1965 the Cuban government was openly supportive of the so-called Simba rebels against the forces of Moïse Tshombe, then head of government in Kinshasa. By 1965 Congo (Brazzaville) became the most important Cuban center in Africa following that government's request for help to organize the training of its militia. In January 1966, Castro won enthusiastic African recognition by hosting the first meeting of the organization for the solidarity of the peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (OSPAAAL). Earlier, March 10, 1965, Castro attempted to get involved in the South Asian war by publicly offering to send arms and men to aid the Vietnamese, but the offer of personnel was turned down. Before his death in Bolivia in 1967, Che Guevara, known to African Nationalists as "Tatu" (a reference to his number three position in Havana), made a number of visits to South African nationalist guerrilla camps.²

Despite these gestures of support for nationalist movements in Africa and even Asia, Castro's first target was Latin America. Castro made many attempts to encourage formation of groups similar to the July 26th movement to initiate and extend guerrilla warfare to the rest of Latin America. This reached its peak at the OLAS (Organization of Latin American States) conference held in Havana in August 1967. Cuba trained and armed guerrilla groups from Central America, Colombia, Venezuela, and Bolivia and sent Cuban military advisors to fight alongside guerrilla groups in their efforts to replace established rulers with socialist government. But these efforts were invariably unsuccessful and only the death of his close friend, Che Guevara, in the highlands of Bolivia in 1967 convinced Castro that his constant efforts to foment revolu-

1. See James Nelson Goodsell, "Cuba's Africa 'Corps' estimated at 50,000." In *Christian Science Monitor*, May 7, 1978. He gives a breakdown of Cuban military and civilian personnel in Africa in the following countries: Congo Republic, Ethiopia, Equatorial Guinea, Angola, Guinea Conakry, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Libya, Algeria, Sao Tome and Principe, Cape Verde Islands, Benin, Algeria, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania.

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2. The chronology of Cuban involvements so far sketched could be collected from many sources, but Zdenek Cervenk's "Cuba and Africa," in *Africa Contemporary Record 1976-1977* (N.Y.: African Publishing Company, 1977) is exhaustive in detailing most of the mentioned dates and events.

tion from the outside had failed in Latin America. While remaining sympathetic to and supportive of existing revolutionary movements, Cuba no longer tried to create them, and focused for the next several years on building up its own society.

The Angolan crisis gave Cuba a perfect justification for implementation and reaffirmation of its international military zeal. Of the three Angolan parties, MPLA, which was founded in 1961, seemed the most likely to institute genuine socialism. Urban-based, with a practical, socialist orientation from its inception, it had more support across ethnic and racial lines, though drawing its major support from Mbundu and Mestizo groups. Its earlier association with the Angolan communist party and its socialist ideology and multiracial structure linked it to the worldwide socialist movement and earned it early support from East European countries and the Soviet Union, as well as multiracial support in the West.³ The effective support of the Soviet Union, the East European countries, and support groups within western countries helped MPLA to build a viable military and political organization by 1974. As a member of CONCP and of OSPAAAL, it also gained a wide range of support within the organization of African Unity, and from international groups like the World Council of Churches.⁴

However, both rival organizations, the FNLA (Angolan National Liberation Front) and UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola), maintained at least some ties with most of these support groups and had significant regional support within the country. The Portuguese at first sought to involve all three groups in an interim government, and after several months of internal feuding the three leaders and Portuguese officials signed the Alvor accord of January 17, 1975, which incorporated this principle into an agreement that was designed to lead to independence through peaceful elections.

According to John Stockwell, former chief of the CIA Angola task force, a week later the U.S. National Security Council approved a \$300,000 grant to one group, the FNLA.⁵ With CIA money and help from Zairian forces, the FNLA moved its armies and soon began attacking MPLA forces. In March 1975 the National Security Council responded to a CIA option paper and approved a \$14 million covert para-military operation in Angola. To all appearances the U.S. Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, and the CIA wanted a military confrontation with the Soviet Union in Angola. Nathaniel Davies, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, resigned his position in pro-

test of this policy. By June, agreement had completely broken down and the three groups were engaged in civil war.

MPLA had control of the port of Luanda and appealed to its eastern friends for shipments of war material, which soon began arriving. On October 23, 1975, a few weeks before the November 11th independence day when the Portuguese left without formal transfer of power, an armored column of 1500 South African troops invaded Angola. Reinforced by a second column on November 15, they and UNITA troops and mercenaries drove 625 miles into Angola, while FNLA troops and mercenaries held much of the north. According to Stockwell, covert delivery of American arms into Angola, collaboration with South Africa, and recruitment of mercenaries were done with full cognizance of the National Security Council, which Kissinger dominated. This covert action caused the MPLA to call on Cuba to come to its aid.

A few Cuban advisors had been with the MPLA since the mid sixties, and in the spring of 1975, 230 more had been sent to help train MPLA soldiers. But significant numbers began to come to MPLA's aid only to repel the invasion of the South African Army and the growing threat from FNLA, which the U.S. supplied with money, weapons, intelligence operations, and airlifts of mercenaries and supplies.

Thus the major Cuban adventure in Africa began in earnest with commitment of several thousand troops: Operation Carlota, named after a 19th century revolt-leading slave woman. With the Cubans using Soviet weapons, MPLA was able to turn the tide in the civil war; by mid-January the South African troops withdrew. Congress blocked further U.S. aid for FNLA and UNITA. The recognition stalemate in the OAU was broken and MPLA became widely acknowledged as the legitimate government. Never before the Angolan war had more than a handful of Cuban soldiers been formally committed to frontline overseas combat as part of a military mission. The civil war success led to the Cuban-Angolan 1976 military agreement which committed Cuba to unlimited defense of Angola against hostile neighbors.⁶

In Angola the Cubans succeeded in winning approval and muting criticism because of the heavy direct involvement of the South Africans on the other side. The Cuban government's decision to stand up to direct South African military intervention was applauded in most of Africa and was an inspiration to other freedom fighters in southern Africa. Support of a military struggle against an imperialist invasion by South Africa (whose political system has been denounced by the international community as a crime against humanity) is certain to be popular in Africa. The Cuban readiness to intervene and participate in frontline combat has given them a new role and a new rationale.

The second major role of Cuban combat involvement has been in the Horn. Cubans were first in Somalia in the early 70s. At the peak of this involvement 750 Cubans

3. For a more detailed analysis of MPLA's ideology and how it influenced external alliances, refer to my Ph.D. dissertation done at the Graduate School of International Studies, University of Denver, Dec. 1975, entitled "Racial Belief Systems of Nationalist Movements: A Case Study of Angola and South Africa," pp 75-82. Said Abdi, "Angolan Nationalist Movements: An Assessment," a paper prepared for the Western Association of Africanists annual meeting, March 31, 1977, held in Lincoln Nebraska, compared the effectiveness of MPLA, FNLA, and UNITA in terms of ideology and program, source of external support and assistance, mobilization capacity and leadership quality.

4. Grants made to MPLA by World Council of Churches in 1970, 1971, 1973, and 1974 were \$78,000 as compared to FNLA's \$60,500, UNITA's \$37,000, in Elizabeth Adler's *A Small Beginning: An Assessment of the First Five Years of the Programme to Combat Racism* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1974), p. 92.

5. The whole CIA covert role I am sketching in this paragraph is discussed specifically in Chapters 2 & 3 of John Stockwell's *In Search of Enemies: A CIA Story* (N.Y.: W.W. Norton and Company Inc., 1978).

6. For the costs incurred in the Angolan adventure see "The Cuban Operation in Angola: Costs and Benefits and the Armed Forces," by Jorge I. Domínguez, in *Cuban Studies* Vol. 8 No. 1, Jan. 1978.

7. The U.N. has in Resolution 392 (1976) reaffirmed that the policy of apartheid is a crime against the conscience and dignity of mankind.

assisted the Somali military.⁸ The Cubans at this time also supported the Socialist-Eritrean Popular Liberation Front (EPLF). But the pattern of conflict in the Horn, pitting Somalis and Eritreans supported by the U.S.S.R. and Cuba against the Ethiopian empire with close political and military ties to the United States began to shift when dramatic change came to Ethiopia.

In September 1974, a military coup in Ethiopia overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie, and the new ruling Dergue very quickly proclaimed its adherence to Socialist principles, instituting major land reforms and other socialist measures without immediately breaking with Selassie's western allies. These changes were welcomed by Cuba and Russia, and initial efforts were directed towards a reconciliation of the new government with Ethiopia's traditional enemies in Somalia and Eritrea. When elements in the Dergue sympathetic to this were eliminated in successive purges, culminating in Haile Meriam Mengistu's rise to power, in February 1977, these conflicts intensified. Russia and Cuba were faced with a difficult choice. Havana's decisive tilt toward the Ethiopians came during Castro's March 1977 trip around Africa which began as a last attempt at reconciliation between Somalia and Ethiopia. Principals in this effort were Soviet President Podgorny and especially Castro, who on March 6, 1977 brought Mengistu and Somali President Siad Barre together at a secret meeting in Aden. But the proposed conciliation involved Somalia, giving up claims to the "Ogaden." Barre turned this down because he could not speak for the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), which sought separation of the region from Ethiopia. He maintained Ogaden Somalis' right to self-determination, asserted the ideal of Eritrean independence, and questioned Soviet-tailored plans in the Red Sea area. Somalia, hitherto regarded as progressive, suddenly became reactionary once it opposed Soviet-Cuban designs and blue prints for the Horn. On March 14, 1977, Fidel Castro arrived in Addis Ababa on a three-day visit to Ethiopia and praised the Mengistu February coup.⁹ Later he called Mengistu a true revolutionary and avoided any talk about Somalia. In May 1977 Mengistu visited the Soviet Union and also received a first contingent of fifty Cuban military advisors followed by Soviet tanks transshipped through South Yemen.¹⁰

In the four months following additional Cuban troops arrived. Once Somalia broke relations with Cuba on September 8, 1977, Cuban intervention increased heavily. Using Russian weapons, the Cubans stopped the Somali drive to help their co-nationals in the Ogaden to liberate themselves. According to Roger Fountaine, Cubans performed four main tasks: training, manning artillery, supplying air support and heavy infantry. In addition, an airborne brigade was sent and deployed in the fight for Jijiga.¹¹ Ethiopia's victory over the Somalis, both the WSLF and regular Somali Republic army units, came only with the help of thousands of Cuban troops and about a billion dollars worth of Soviet arms. According to most estimates (including *The Christian Science Monitor* article

cited earlier) Castro still maintains close to 17,000 troops in Ethiopia.¹²

In the judgment of many, Cuba's support of Mengistu's government against Somali nationalists has been a serious blunder. Those who regard the Somali population in the Ogaden as an oppressed minority like the Eritreans see Cuba's action as being against the principle of self-determination and in support of oppression and, therefore, in opposition to true progressive principles. From this perspective, Cuba is seen as the running dog of a new Soviet imperialism.¹³

Having failed to get the necessary supplies and material from the West, Somali troops withdrew back inside their own borders. The Ethiopian government and its allies were then able to turn to Eritrea, where the liberation movements had gained control of most of the countryside and many of the cities, clearly with the support of the vast majority of the populace. To Castro's credit, there seemed to be considerable resistance in Havana to Mengistu's insistence that Cuban support be as freely available in Eritrea as in the Ogaden. One step taken to resolve this dilemma, the apparent effort to return the Meison Marxists to a position in government,¹⁴ also raised questions among some progressives about outside interference in the internal affairs of an ally. It is clear that both in supporting Mengistu and in backing down when he challenges them, as they did on this issue, the Cubans and Soviets are treading on dangerous ground. They are forced to choose on the basis of power rather than merit between various proclaimed socialist contenders, and then they acquiesce during the oppression and even liquidation of fellow socialists. Although there have been claims and counter-claims about the extent of direct Cuban involvement in the Eritrean fighting, it is clear that Soviet equipment and the training supplied by the Cubans and Soviets to Ethiopian troops have helped make possible the recent Ethiopian offensive which resulted in the recapture of most Eritrean roads and towns.

A third spot in Africa where Cubans have been accused of fomenting trouble is Zaire, although hard evidence of this is lacking. President Mobutu, President Carter, and others have claimed that the soldiers of the Front for the National Liberation of the Congo (FNLC) who staged rebellions in Shaba province in 1977 and 1978, did so with Cuban support and instigation. Contrary to western propaganda, FNLC's proclaimed aim is not a Shaba secession but the overthrow of the Mobutu government.¹⁵ Both re-

8. *Foreign Report* Nov. 16, 1977, p. 4.

9. Raul Valde's *Vivo's Ethiopia the Unknown Revolution* (Havana: Social Sciences Publishers, 1978).

10. *Washington Post*, May 25 and 26.

11. "Cuba on the Horn," by Roger W. Fountaine, in *The Washington Review* (New Brunswick Transaction Periodical Consortium, May, 1978).

12. Fountaine argues that this amount was not unreasonable in the Ogaden campaign and that the figures would have been higher if it had not been for the lavish use of airpower (including helicopter gun ships), heavy artillery, and tanks before the infantry was engaged. (See footnote 11.)

13. A while back in Socialist Somalia, imperialism was thought the domain of the capitalist West. Today as one author reports: "true to form, Fidel Castro finds himself depicted in Crayon as a small undignified dog trotting over the map of Africa behind a man-eating Russian giant" (a special correspondent in *The Economist*, June 3, 1978).

14. Both Cuba and Russia had links with the 'Meison' led by Haile Fida, which they wanted to make the nucleus of a pro-Moscow Communist party. The Cubans and Soviets tried to get Haile released and reinstate his organization as the vanguard party. While Mengistu was visiting Havana, the Cubans sneaked into Ethiopia through the backdoor, Negede, a leader of Meison, in an attempt to inject their own leftist favorites into government. As a result Mengistu expelled Castro's own ambassador from Addis Ababa.

15. See "What Happened in Zaire." In *West Africa*, May 29, 1978.

bellions have been put down only by foreign intervention on behalf of the central government. Most neutral observers see the rebellions as a testimony to Mobutu's unpopularity after thirteen years as president rather than to Cuban intervention. Lack of hard evidence to support this initial charge that Cuba had trained and supported the rebels led President Carter to shift his ground and emphasize instead a claim that Cuba had known in advance of the action (which Castro acknowledged) and had not acted to forestall it. The timing of the charges and the lack of follow-up would indicate that the U.S. government was flexing its muscles for domestic political purposes, to soothe the jingoes who want to see Soviet and Cuban imperialism checked but who care less about their own imperialism and support of unrepresentative governments as long as Africa is safe for western multinational corporations. Clearly the economic and strategic importance of Zaire to the West¹⁶ led the U.S. to feel it necessary to support Mobutu's government, no matter how corrupt. That this corruption is rampant is widely acknowledged in the western press:

Zaire is a mess and seems destined to remain a mess for a long time while western interests—as foreign to Africa as the Cubans—seek to salvage their investments in Katatan ores and bonds.¹⁷

He [President Mobutu] is a grandiose spender who has led Zaire to bankruptcy and his regime is quite blatantly corrupt.¹⁸

Part of the problem, from a Western viewpoint, is that the situation in Zaire is not unique. Many other countries in Africa suffer from unemployment, ethnic discrimination, police brutality, political repression, nepotism, profiteering by those in power, and serious mismanagement of resources, with oppressive governments maintained in power by massive Western assistance. In these situations, the vaunted human rights policies of the Carter administration give way to the concern for stability, and the simmering discontent under the surface—when it erupts in rebellion—is easier to blame on Soviet and Cuban meddling than on the objective situation. Given their ideological presuppositions as well as their position in the East-West rivalry, Cuban sympathies tend to be with the rebels or potential rebels, and supportive rhetoric or more tangible forms of assistance tend to reinforce the Western claim of Cuban (and Soviet) interference and meddling.

The most likely arena for a further expansion of Cuba's role in Africa remains the struggle against white rule in the south. As long as peaceful solutions in Zimbabwe, Namibia, and the Republic of South Africa remain elusive,

the possibility of escalation and active Cuban involvement becomes more likely.¹⁹

If the recent escalation in Zimbabwe, the attacks on bases of Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), and raids into Zambia against Joshua Nkomo's Zimbabwe Peoples' Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) continue, the result may well be a call by Zambia's President Kenneth Kaunda for Cuban troops to defend his borders, despite his obvious efforts to avoid this by his trip to Kano, Nigeria, to meet with Prime Minister James Callaghan of Great Britain. For the moment, the renewed ZAPU-ZANU unity in the face of the increased intransigence of the rebel government in Salisbury, exemplified by the joint Nkomo-Mugabe visit to Addis Ababa in early September, seems to have greatly lessened the likelihood of another more ominous scenario of intervention. While the two wings of the Patriotic Front have now held together for almost three years, reports of tensions and disunity persist, and moves for closer integration both militarily and politically have been thwarted. Clearly the bulk of Soviet-Cuban support has gone to ZAPU and ZIPRA under Nkomo, with substantial support in terms of material and training; Mugabe's ZANU and ZANLA have relied more heavily on Chinese aid, holding Cuba at arm's length. Both leaders have repeatedly disavowed any intention of seeking involvement of Cuban troops in the struggle against the settler regime, but any breakdown in the alliance could weaken this resolve, as could massive South African and Western intervention on behalf of the Salisbury government.

Until South Africa abrogated its support of the five-power plan for Namibia as proposed to and ratified by the Security Council after Commissioner Adessari's fact-finding visit, it seemed likely that Namibia would not provide an occasion for Cuban involvement. However, if the new Premier, Peter Botha, resists Western pressure and world opinion to conduct free elections including the participation of SWAPO (The South West African People's Organization), a continuation of guerrilla war seems inevitable, with the possibility that SWAPO might at some point feel constrained to call for direct assistance from Cuba.

Clearly, if moderate, black buffer governments are established in Zimbabwe and Namibia, the escalation of direct pressure on the Republic of South Africa will not be as rapid as it is likely that it would become with Patriotic Front and SWAPO governments in those countries. However, given the good relationships FRELIMO and MPLA have historically had with South Africa's African National Congress (ANC) and the active support of the governments they now lead in Mozambique and Angola, it is clear that sanctuaries, training bases, and infiltration points are already available to South African guerrillas.

Only time will tell whether and under what conditions, if

16. Zaire supplies 75% of the U.S. cobalt, and with Zambia, it is the world's top copper exporter. Western intervention was motivated by the economic importance of Zaire. According to the *Economist*, May 27, 1978, in an article entitled "But How Much of Africa Can Giscard Embrace?" mineral production in Shaba accounts for 75% of Zaire's total export earnings. Zaire produces 6% of the world's copper output and, more vital, 50% of world's cobalt. It is also a big producer of diamonds, tin, zinc, silver, platinum, and uranium. Kolwezi lies at the heart of this wealth. In 1977 half of Zaire's copper was mined near Kolwezi.

17. The editors of the *New York Times*, June 15, 1978.

18. *Time Magazine*, June 5, 1978.

19. One should not lose sight of why Southern African problems are intractable. The economic stakes are high. Zimbabwe has some of the biggest chrome reserves in the world; Namibia is the world's second largest producer of gem diamonds and has important deposits of copper, uranium, lead, zinc, and other minerals; South Africa itself has the most varied mineral resources of any country except the United States and the Soviet Union. It produces 3/4 of western gold output; has 3/4 of the world's chrome ore reserves; has 1/3 of the known uranium reserves; and has large resources of platinum, vanadium, and coal; it has important deposits of diamonds, nickel, asbestos, titanium, and numerous other minerals.

any, pro-Moscow, pro-Cuba ANC would invite direct Cuban military intervention in their struggle in South Africa.²⁰ In the event of Soviet-Cuban military participation, South Africa could fight a full-scale, perhaps nuclear war, in order to retain its apartheid system. It is in the interest of all groups involved to stop such a calamity from taking place by working out a peaceful transfer of power to majority rule.

Reasons and Rationales for Cuban Involvement in Africa

Having chronologically outlined Cuban involvement in Africa, I now examine two major reasons that may account for Castro's intervention in African affairs. The two factors that stand out as explaining Cuban entanglements of commitments are Cuban dependency on the Soviets and Castro's own revolutionary ideology or idealism.

Soviet Dependency

As an external element, there is the fact that dependency on the Soviet Union influences and has almost become a main determinant of Cuban foreign policy in Africa. It is clear that Russians are paying for all of these Cuban undertakings. Besides, Cuba's success in its adventurism, depends on the timing of the arrival of Soviet heavy arms, which no doubt had to be agreed upon by and procured from the Soviets. A Soviet diplomat Shliapnikoy once arrogantly described the Soviet hold over Cuba: "[We have] only to say that repairs are being held up at Baku for three weeks and that is that."²¹ It is obvious that without constant transfusions of Soviet aid, a small country like Cuba could not achieve its large-scale military goals and successes in Africa. Russia pours enormous amounts of daily outright grants, subsidies and technical aid into Cuba which also gets virtually all of its formidable military arsenal free from the Soviet Union. As long as Russia keeps the island economically afloat and helps man its defenses, Moscow will have infinite influence on Castro's policy in Africa, or anywhere else.

Historically tracing the Cuban Soviet connections, it is fair to say that there were great ups and downs in their relationships during the 1960s. Throughout this period there was intense conflict between Castro and the Soviet Union. There was disagreement, distrust, and recrimination—albeit private and muted—on almost all important issues. First during the Cuban missile crisis Cuban faith in the Soviet commitment to socialism in the Latin-American hemisphere was shaken when Moscow backed down and the United States and the Soviets—both sobered by the confrontation and how close they came to mutual annihilation—began a slow reappraisal of some aspects of the Cold War strategy and tactics, over the heads of the Cuban government: "Castro still is not completely comfortable in

dealing with Russians. He has never forgiven the Kremlin for negotiating directly with the U.S. during 1962 missile crisis without consulting them."²²

During the beginning of 1967, the conflict was quite open, with Cuba supporting Latin American guerrilla groups openly, who in turn were under fire from Moscow—oriented and independent Communist parties, some of whom sought legitimacy and participation through electoral and other more conventional political tactics, and others by trying to heighten class tensions and trying to mobilize people on their behalf. Cuba criticized the Soviet failure to respond to U.S. military intervention in Vietnam through counter-intervention. But Che Guevara's death and five years of U.S. trade embargo (or as Cubans call it, blockade) mellowed down Castro's militarism and independence from Moscow, and sealed his acceptance of Soviet clientelism. He succumbed to the Kremlin on major issues. This was clearly apparent when in August 1968, while at first criticizing Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia with evident ambivalence and apprehension of Soviet reaction, Castro finally allied and supported Soviet intervention. Describing the Warsaw Pact Invasion as "a drastic and painful measure . . . a bitter necessity," he aligned Cuba with Soviet aggression at a crucial time when world opinion was frowning on Russia's interference in domestic politics of a sovereign nation. By the early seventies Cubans had also clearly taken the Soviet side in the Sino-Soviet split and Cuban officials increasingly endorsed Soviet positions in international forums. It is clear that the price exacted by the Soviets for their aid irritated the Cubans. They had to forego speaking out freely. While they were able to get the required material aid in time to save their economy, the cost was heavy in terms of their political independence. For those who believe in Soviet imperialism, wittingly or unwittingly Cubans are facilitating Soviet grand designs for world domination.²³ Richard Fagen asked his Cuban guide what he thought of Soviet influence; he answered: "It does not exist, we simply owe them our lives."²⁴

Though some Cuban adventures in Africa are motivated by internal factors at least partially independent of Soviet policy (as I will discuss next), economic dependency and military ties preclude Cuba doing anything in Africa directly opposed by the Russians. Castro would find it almost impossible to circumvent any strong "no" by Soviets to any of his foreign policies. Obviously the Russians appreciate the Cuban role because they anticipate a much more hostile international reaction if they use their own infantry in Africa. They attempt to disguise their imperialism by using Cuba as a front so that recol-

22. *U.S. News and World Report*, June 12, 1978.

23. The Soviets are setting themselves as the supreme world arbiters. And one does not have to agree with the Chinese (who themselves exhibit opportunistic foreign policy) descriptions of Russia in order to realize that the Soviet Union is an imperialist country with a socialist front. Whether one applies Leninist definition of export capital as a solid basis for imperialist oppression or whether one looks at how mechanisms of dependency such as aid, loans, and trade operate in Soviet-Third World, Soviet-eastern European, one cannot but conclude their aims and practices and designs are imperial in every sense of the world. "Soviet-Social Colonialism Exposed," by Hsing Hua, in *Peking Review*, December 2, 1977, pp. 21. Despite its Chinese buzzwords and political polemics like 'social imperialism,' this article is a brief, incisive exposé of Soviet imperialist foreign policies.

24. Richard Fagen, "Cuba and the Soviet Union." In: *The Wilson Quarterly*, Winter 1978, p. 69.

20. Oliver Tambo head of the ANC has been very supportive of all Cuban activities in Africa and seems less independent from Moscow. Attending the 11th International Youth Festival he, for example, commented: "Cuba is the kind of world that a normal human being would aspire to"; quoted from "Politics Aside, Cuba is Festive for Visiting Young Leftists," by Alan Riding, in the *New York Times*, August 7, 1978.

21. "Cuba and Africa," by Zdenek Cervenka, in *Africa Contemporary* record (N.Y.: Africana Publishing Co., 1977), p. A86.

onization of Africa may be achieved without the disapprobation of the Third World and the nonaligned movement. But the Soviet hold on Cuba and its designs on Africa closely coincides with Cuban ideology, especially in Africa. Gratitude for the Soviet rescue of Cuba from the American campaign to crush its revolution as well as a basic communality of ideology has cemented a relationship in which the Cubans, however impalatable they may find their dependency, have no alternative but to regard the Soviets as indispensable allies.

It would be hard to imagine a closer identification of two nations than the enshrinement of fraternal friendship, help, and cooperation of Moscow and Havana in the preamble of the new constitution of Cuba drafted in 1975.

Cuban Ideology as An Explanatory Factor for Its Involvement in Africa:

But the Soviet-Cuban relationship is not a one-way street. Castro's regime exercises a certain initiative, resulting in Cuban influence being brought to bear on Soviet politics in Africa. Cuba's initiative derives from ideological commitment to export revolution to the Third World. It is this ideology of Third World revolutionary solidarity that led Cuba, instead of the Poles, Czechs, or East Germans, into direct combat operations in Africa with Soviet weapons and support, despite all the problems of distance, transport and a small population base. There is no question about the enthusiasm of Cuban leaders for their African role. Castro does not regard himself as a Soviet lackey who hires out his soldiers as mercenaries to do Soviet bidding. Instead he views himself as the pioneer of Third World revolution called to support "wars of liberation" anywhere in the world. Cuba has always placed more emphasis than most other communist states on military matters. The Cuban press constantly depicts military scenes or the arrival or departure of some minister of defense from other countries of the communist world. The Cuban armed forces are now larger and more powerful than any in Eastern Europe except for Poland (whose population is four times that of Cuba's). Cuba's historical experience reinforces Castro's affirmation of Mao's "power comes from the barrel of the gun." "As long as there is a revolutionary with a gun, no cause will ever be lost," Castro told senior officers in the army in December 1976, after four days of military maneuvers. The history of Cuba's international involvement since Castro's rise to power, as summarized earlier in this paper, demonstrates the country's commitment to this doctrine.

Another justification given for Cuban involvement in Africa is Cuba's self-identification as a Latin-African nation.²⁵ Unmarxist, ethnic and racial identifications become one more rationale for involvement in Africa. Sixty percent of the Cuban troops in Angola were black. The great number of Cubans of African descent enable Castro to build on the historical linkages between Cuba and Africa.

Cuba's Internal Politics and Economy

Cuba's foreign policy cannot be assessed in isolation

25. Look at Castro's speech, "We Stand With People of Africa" (N.Y.: The Venceremos Brigade, 1976), p. 8.

from its domestic politics and economy, and there is wide disagreement among scholars, commentators, observers, and writers (even on the left) about the state of Cuban domestic affairs. Numerous observers have returned from the island praising the new society in Cuba. American anthropologist Oscar Lewis was given freedom of the island for a year to pursue sociological studies, and in 1977 he reported: "nowhere did we find the estrangement, isolation, and despair or marginal existence that we saw among the poor of other countries." Achievements attributed to Cuba's government by many writers are impressive: elimination of unemployment;²⁶ banning of racism;²⁷ promulgation of equal rights for women; creation of a free educational system; establishment of a model social security system, including health care; subsidized rents and attempts to end shortage of housing; and a successful and equitable agrarian reform. But there are also critics. Rene Dumont, a French socialist,²⁸ and K.S. Karot, a Maoist,²⁹ question the often-heralded Cuban economic accomplishments and criticize entrenched political elitism. Cuba remains a totalitarian, one-party communist state with Fidel Castro as the head of state, party, government, and supreme commander of the armed forces. There is an increase in the social importance of the layers charged with defense and a drift towards bureaucratization.

Cuba's extensive overseas commitments are made despite, or perhaps in part because of, the fact that economically the island is far from self-sufficient. Per capita income is one eighth of that of West Germany, while GNP is half of Portugal, a country of equal population and one of Europe's poorest.³⁰ Small and poor, except for nickel reserves, Cuba under Castro has sought to achieve economic progress and political autonomy by procuring aid from the Soviets and enhancing its trade relations, by becoming the first Western hemisphere nation to join the Comecon. But the country's economy is still based on one crop—sugar—which accounts for eighty percent of export earnings. The other main export earners are nearly all primary products—citrus fruits, nickel, fish, and tobacco. Cuba thus still depends on the unstable markets for agricultural and mineral products. Is the extensive overseas commitment made in spite of the instability of its weak economy? Or is the economy an additional impetus to the commitment, which soaks up the potentially unemployed or underemployed and stimulates additional Soviet assistance?

An Appraisal: The Pros and Cons of Cuba's Role in Africa

An analysis of Cuba's foreign policy in Africa reveals three distorting factors. The first is the Soviet effort, backed by the leverage of economic aid to Cuba, to dictate or mold Cuba's policy. The second is the contradiction

26. There is some literature that, contrary to this, argues that involvement in Africa has offered Cuba a kind of safety valve for a burgeoning problem of youth unemployment.

27. Again, John Clytus, in his *Black Man in Red Cuba* (University of Miami, 1971) questions the glowing accounts of Cuba as having resolved all its race problems.

28. In his *Is Cuba a Socialist?* (New York: Viking, 1974).

29. In his *Guerrillas in Power* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1970).

30. See "Castro's New Crusade," in *Atlas World Review Press*, May 15, 1977 (excerpted from *Der Spiegel*).

contained in the preeminent role of armed force in implementing Cuban policy, which tends to distort the pursuit of a correct political program. The third is the contradiction involved in a geographically remote country of only ten million people trying to engineer the African revolution and influence its direction. However, Cuban concern about southern African oppression based on race; about Western exploitation of the Third World, in favor of a restructuring of the world economy to remove inequities; and its willingness to implement these concerns with political, and military activism is nonetheless a serious moral stance, even though it runs the danger of being so self-righteous that it is blind to other peoples' right to self-determination and control of their own destiny.

The Cubans argue that their involvement in African countries is by invitation only.³¹ Although the technical argument is sound, given the large number of incidents of foreign troops participating "on invitation" in other countries, its strategic wisdom is open to question. Precisely when many Western nations (especially the U.S. following its agonizing reappraisal of its Vietnamese adventure) were becoming cautious about getting involved militarily in civil wars, Cuba's actions are evoking a reassertion of Western militarism and, thus, reversing the relaxation of tensions between major powers that is essential for world peace. Furthermore, through interventionist policies in areas where other external military involvement is not present, Cuba subverts the nonalignment movement's pledges to national sovereignty and all peoples' right to self-determination, its affirmations on peace and disarmament, and its belief in the U.N. as the forum where all global conflicts are to be debated and possibly resolved. Cuba's military involvement in the Horn violates the rights of progressive Ethiopians, Somalis, and Eritreans to form their own programs, define their own internal contradictions, study their own internal class structures, and self-reliantly wage their own struggles through the mobilization of their own human and material resources around the efficacy of their programs.

The Cubans argue that their role is completely subordinate to host countries and that they do not act like an expeditionary force but as advisors, technicians, and troops at the service of the host and that Cuba gains nothing for itself. First, the distinctions between expeditionary and liberatory is largely one of semantics. Once one intervenes militarily in the domestic affairs of a country on the scale that Cuba has done in Angola and the Horn, the claim of subservience to the host government becomes tenuous because of the dominant-subordinate military disequilibrium and dependency. Second, such a massive presence makes it difficult if not impossible to resist the temptation to manipulate, influence, and become self-appointed arbiters in disputes of a localized domestic nature. Evidence of this has been cited above.

Castro's claim to have no significant economic involvement with, and certainly no major economic benefits from, their African allies, is of doubtful validity. Trade links with Angola, though not large, seem to be growing. More important, whether from design or not, the Cuban

presence, depending for its basic financing on the Soviet Union, tends to facilitate further Soviet economic penetration, which, looked at objectively, often tends to be as exploitative in the terms of trade laid down as that of Western powers. The Soviet strategic interest in both the geopolitical location and potential resources of the Horn and Angola is obvious.

Cuba's definition of nonalignment as an anti-Western movement, is in conflict with many nonaligned countries who feel they are facing equal threats from the East and the West. Yugoslavia, in the 113-member nonaligned foreign minister's conference in Belgrade in July 1978, in opposition to Cuba, maintained that nonalignment opposes Soviet hegemony as well as Western neocolonialism and must accommodate the variety of social systems chosen by individual members.

There is the danger in this anti-Western stance that Cuba may uncritically embrace governments having little in common with Cuba other than being condemned and isolated by the West. Though the involvement has never been large and may now no longer exist, Cuba has been reported at various times to have provided assistance to the governments of Equatorial Guinea and Uganda, both clearly regimes that maintain power by the ruthless slaughter of their own people, a form of control not unknown in Ethiopia³² where Cuba's continuing involvement has been much more massive.

Cuba claims to be upholding the principle of the territorial integrity of nations in its involvement in the Horn, by opposing the secessionist claims of the peoples of the Ogaden and Eritrea. The firmness of this claim is at once called into question with a reminder that Cuban support for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Eritrea spanned more than a decade prior to its involvement with the new regime in Ethiopia, and that it maintained a close friendly relationship with the government of Somalia throughout this same period, even though the Somali government always showed its support for the Western Somali Liberation Front. Support for this principle by Cuba's Soviet ally is even more questionable, since the Soviets favored the EPLF and Somalia even more strongly than the Cubans but also actively worked against this principle in supporting the secession of Bangladesh from Pakistan. Also, it should not be forgotten that Russia and Cuba were only too glad to help the Eritreans (and to some extent Somali Nationalists who made claims for self-determination in Ogaden) so long as they were struggling against the pro-American regime of Haile Selassie in Addis Ababa. In the Horn it is regressive for Cubans to overlook internally based struggles for democratic socialist goals in favor of Soviet grand designs to make Ethiopia a rear base to expand into the Horn and into rich oil states across the Red Sea and Arabian Gulf.

Finally, and on the progressive side, Cuba should be

32. Atrocities being committed against the Ethiopian masses and opposition groups such as EPRP by Mengistu's government have been widely and daily reported. The Swedish "Save the Children Fund," for example, mentioned the massacre of 1000 students within six days in March 1977 alone. Gerard Chaliand, in "The Horn of Africa's Dilemma," in *Foreign Policy* No. 30, Spring 1978, page 119 states: "According to Amnesty International, it is probable that at least 10,000 people were killed for political reasons during 1977 alone. Altogether, it is believed that since 1974, the Dergue has killed 30,000 people in Ethiopia for political reasons. By killing many of the nation's students, the revolution may have killed its own, and the country's future."

31. See an unexpurgated text of Castro/Barbara Walters interview given on May 19, during Walters' stay in Cuba in 1977. An English translation of the full text of the interview appeared in two installments in the July 17 and July 24 1977 issues of *Granma Weekly Review*.

first given credit for its humanitarian assistance to African countries.³³ Cuba's support for southern African struggles against minority white regimes should be applauded; the mark Cuba made on Africa through its successful checkmating of South Africa will be permanent. The Cuban decision to send troops to Angola to check South Africa's military intervention was justified. Luckily, U.S. congressional discovery of the Ford-Kissinger-CIA covert activities and its disapproval of overt U.S. involvement prevented the Angolan struggle from being escalated to an all out East-West conflict.³⁴ Removal of minority white regimes in southern Africa is one issue that unifies African governments and deserves both Eastern and Western support. The possibility of civil strife in Zimbabwe, if there is no compromise between the factions within the patriotic front—and between the front and internal settlement supporters—could invite dangerous external involvements. But Sino-Soviet rivalry, Soviet-Cuban/Western conflicts are a menace to the sovereignty and security of Zimbabwe and should be neutralized.

Conclusion

Cuba should realize and appreciate (because of her experience with the U.S.) the ability of the superpowers to bring to bear extreme pressure on any country in the defenseless Third World (with no other armament industries) that tries to defy their political dictates. Nonalignment as a foreign policy and common economic front is the most viable option for Third World countries. Africans are not about to accept a rescramble of their laws by the old colonial and neocolonial powers and their still present entrenchment in southern Africa; nor do they intend

to throw off Western imperialism merely to accept its replacement by a Soviet-Cuban version.³⁵

Africa remains a continent of warring nationalisms—some of them struggling on behalf of nations that reject present borders—brewing class struggles that can only be resolved through indigenous understandings of unique social formations. Restraints in combat involvements in other countries are needed, especially where the West does not use any proxies. East-West tensions could result in the annihilation of the human race, and Cuba, if it values its place in the Third World, should seek to disengage from military confrontations in this complex arena. At best it will find itself enmeshed in civil wars and disputes for which it has neither the resources nor knowledge to control. Already Cuba has come close to making irretractable errors in these relationships.³⁶ Soviets, Western powers, both imperialists, and their respective agents trample across Africa because of its richness and strategic importance. They fabricate phony issues to blame on each other for the misery they bring on the victims, in this case Africans.

This analysis does not condemn the presence of Cubans in Africa as such, but has sought to evaluate where and when Cuban policies reflect a positive or negative impact, seeking to point out what is most questionable and what is most acceptable about their undertakings. Criticism has centered on Cuba's militaristic ideology, its dependency on the Soviets and support for Soviet imperialist adventures in their attempts to interfere and dictate their own political and economic policies to smaller countries. But Cuban aid and assistance in education, health, housing, and transportation in many African countries could contribute to their economic development and should be welcomed.

33. See Ronald Buchanan's "The Bridge Builders from Cuba." In *Africa Magazine* No. 82, June 1978. Against Cuban military involvement he counterposes what he calls the army of Cuban civilian aides who for many years have been contributing to Africa's development efforts.

34. Through the Tunney amendment approved by the Senate on Dec. 19, 1975 and by the House in Jan. 29, 1976 in its fiscal year 1976 defense appropriations bill, the Congress blocked money for further escalation of U.S. involvement in Angola. According to John Stockwell, the CIA director and Kissinger were acutely aware that the American public and Congress would not tolerate involvement in Angolan strife three months after U.S. evacuation from South Vietnam. He says they lied about a covert CIA program with a \$1 million dollar budget. (See statement of John Stockwell, former chief, CIA Angola task force, made before House of Representatives Committee of International Relations, subcommittee on Africa, on May 25, 1978, during the 95th Congress, 2nd session and printed by U.S. government printing office, Washington, 1978 under the title of *United States—Angolan Relations*.)

35. A little pamphlet entitled "Upsurge in Africa: Cuba, the U.S. and the New Rise of the African Liberation Struggle," by Trotskyist David Frankel (N.Y.: Pathfinder Press, 1978). Frankel takes a contradictory position: on the one hand he criticizes Castro for putting military questions before the political ones, while on the other hand he

applauds Cuba's adventurism in Africa and argues that it has been all Cuba's initiative to get involved in Africa. In fact, he gives credit for Cuba making the Soviets more bold and revolutionary by escalating and embarking on greater military confrontations with the West. Anti-détente and peaceful co-existence oriented his paper fails to delineate where the delicate line is to be drawn among superpowers between mutual self-destruction and peaceful ideological competition. By hailing new Soviet militarism in Africa which he attributes to Cuba's revolutionizing effect on the Russians, he seems unconcerned and unperturbed by any scenario of an all-out war between the superpowers suggested by this new Russian posture of military confrontation.

36. Gerald Bender's "Angola, the Cubans and American Anxieties." In *Foreign Policy* No. 31, Summer 1978. In discussing an attempted May 1977 coup in Angola, Bender mentions how Soviets provided encouragement and support to Alves (the coup leader) and his followers and how the immediate recall and replacement of the Cuban ambassador to Angola after the coup attempt was cited as evidence of Cuban complicity, though Bender says there is no information to confirm this. These attempts to try to overthrow a government they first brought to power through their military aid is very similar to what they did in Ethiopia when they attempted to replace the Dergue with Meison.