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Ulterior Motives: Understanding Castro's Intervention in Angola, 1975-1989 Jacob Key

Cuba has promoted the exportation of its revolution ever since Castro declared his Marxist-Leninist beliefs in the years after Fulgencio Batista's retreat on New Years Day 1959. Cuban specialists were spotted worldwide in the second half of twentieth century, spreading political dissention in Latin America and overseas. The movements supported by the regime generally took the form of grassroots guerrilla campaigns similar to Cuba's own. There was, however, one notable exception: the full-scale deployment of Cuban troops to the former Portuguese colony of Angola in 1975. This was completely unprecedented in the realm of Cuban foreign policy. Common explanations for Castro's intervention include ideological zeal and a desire to please his Soviet backers, but careful analysis of contemporary evidence suggests another motivation entirely.

The country of Angola sits on the west coast of Africa, immediately south of the Congo and north of Namibia. The colony was scheduled to pass from Portuguese to local rule in November 1975. However, the Portuguese government was reluctant to specify a specific group to empower, choosing instead to create a coalition government from the three major factions left over from the war for independence: the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, The National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, and the National Front for the Liberation of Angola. Soon after the founding of the coalition, the Popular Movement maneuvered itself into total control, beginning a bloody, decades-long civil war for control of post-colonial Angola.

The Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) was founded in 1956, making it by far the oldest of the three factions. The socialist movement was based in the capital of Luanda, and was composed of much of that city's intellectual community. The Marxist ideology officially adopted by the group in 1976 gained much support from the Soviet Union and its Eastern bloc satellites. Consequently, this move also brought the ire of the Soviet Union's enemies, leading to Western Europe's and the United States' patronage of UNITA and the eventual progression of the conflict into a Vietnam-scale proxy war in the 1980s.

The National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) was formed in 1966. Populist in nature, and far less

radical than the MPLA, UNITA had the backing of the Western powers. UNITA was nearly destroyed in the autumn of 1975, but surviving leaders managed to regroup and form a second government at Huambo in central Angola. The second government controlled the Ble Plateau, home to the capital of Huambo and much of the country's agriculture. UNITA continued to oppose the MPLA government despite continual defeats in both guerilla and conventional spheres.

The National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) appeared in 1962 as a separatist movement in the north of Angola. Taking a backseat to the larger conflict between the MPLA and UNITA, the FNLA was decisively crushed by the MPLA government and most of its leaders exiled or killed. The remnants of the group merged with UNITA in 1975 as part of the alternative government.

Cuba entered the conflict in late 1975 as a response to a South African push through what is now Namibia. At the peak of the initial conflict, Cuba had 36,000 troops on the ground, more troops, proportionate to the population, than the United States had deployed in Vietnam.¹ Cuban troops numbered 40,000 in 1986, and 50,000 by the time of the final withdraw-

al in 1989. Cuba's successes in those first years were many; South Africa was pushed back, Cuba became a major player in African politics, and the Soviets were appeased.²

Scholar Jorge Dominguez lists four "rules" that guided any decision Castro or his cabinet made concerning the support of revolutionary movements abroad. They are the rule of internationalism, the rule of precedence, the rule of bargaining, and the vanguard rule. The rule of internationalism basically is that Cuba officially supports revolutionary movements. Castro gave a speech in 1966 concerning revolutions in Latin America, Asia, and Africa: "For Cuban revolutionaries the battleground against imperialism encompasses the whole world."³ Marxism-Leninism and revolution are often grouped together in the popular consciousness, but it should be noted that for Castro, one does not necessarily demand or imply the other, a fact made clear by the second rule.

The second rule is the rule of precedence, which makes any effort abroad secondary to the survival of the Cuban state. This means that Cuba would not intervene in any situation where the outcome would impede Cuba's progress as a state. This rule, however practical and realistic it may be, still lends an air of opportunism to Cuba's foreign policy decisions, a sug-

gestion further solidified by the third rule.

The rule of bargaining stated that support for revolutions abroad could be either curtailed or accelerated as a way to bargain with other nations for "specific advantages."⁴ This rule, like the one that precedes it, gives priority to practicality rather than ideology. Indeed, the rules of precedence and bargaining superseded the rule of internationalism in almost every case.⁵

The fourth and final rule is the vanguard rule, which states that Cuban support for movements abroad are contingent on that movement's willingness to defer to Cuba on ideological matters. This rule is perhaps the most interesting, and almost certainly the most self-serving. If Cuba only allows governments loyal to its ideals to come to power, how then does Cuba's foreign policy differ from that of the capitalist nations it so frequently attacked? If these four rules are any indication, it can be argued that Cuba's motives abroad were more often than not errands of selfishness rather than nobility.

Holding the intervention in Angola up to Dominguez's four rules offers a vision of Cuba's actions that is alternately confusing and enlightening. The intervention fulfills the first rule easily. Antonio Neto's MPLA was a Marxist group operating against

sponsored by the United States; indeed, Cuba could not have asked for a better scenario, ideologically speaking. But for the intervention to qualify under rules two and three, there must have been something in it for Castro. The most obvious answer is that Castro sought to impress his Soviet contacts; however, diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Cuba had been stretched quite thin for around a decade. "The Soviets may now be close to losing their patience, and the Castroites never had very much to begin with," reads a CIA memo dated 21 November 1967. "Brezhnev thinks that Castro is some kind of idiot, and Castro probably isn't too fond of Brezhnev either."⁶

Cuba had in previous years become very vocal about perceived Soviet failures both at home and abroad. The Cuban government criticized the USSR's domestic polices and expressed disappointment for its handling of Vietnam. On the other hand, the Soviets were tiring of its near-fruitless sponsorship of Cuba, its "socialist beacon" in the West.⁷ Indeed, aside from propaganda, the support and economic aid offered by the Soviets made little profit. The Soviet Union was hemorrhaging money keeping up with all of its satellite states, not just Cuba; Cuba however received some special consideration due to its revolutionary beginnings and its proximity to the United

States. The largest aid the Soviets offered were subsidies in sugar and petroleum: Soviets overpaid for Cuban sugar and undercharged for Soviet petroleum. Since almost all of Cuba's economy was based on its sugar plantations, the most practical way to keep Cuba afloat was to buy its sugar. The Soviets were paying 482 pesos per ton in 1975, as compared to 71 per ton in 1958. By the same token, the easiest way to keep Cuba's plantations running smoothly was to offer it

extremely low prices on petroleum, on average of 70 pesos per ton compared to worldwide price of 200 per ton.⁸ These two major subsidies, as well as a plethora of specialists and technical advisors, cost the Soviets an average of \$300 million per year during the sixties.⁹ The Cubans were just as frustrated by this arrangement as the Soviets were; their complete reliance on the USSR meant that Castro's nation could never truly be autonomous, and that Cuban policy was constrained somewhat by the wishes of its benefactor.

The main area of conflict between the two Communist nations was their attitudes toward the spread of revolution. Castro, of course, believed in the export of violent revolution from Cuba to the rest of the world; the Soviet Union instead adopted

less violent positions in favor of more patient ones, insisting the revolution wait for the proper conditions before powering ahead. "Marxist-Leninists have always understood that socialism cannot be transplanted from one country to the other by means of armed force," said Brezhnev.¹⁰ All of these factors contributed to Castro's frustration with his country's reliance

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on Soviet aid. In 1968, a particular low point in relations with the Soviets, Castro gave a speech, exhorting his countrymen to "struggle bravely," and to "to minimize [Cuba's] dependence on everything from abroad . . . Let us fight for the greatest independence possible, whatever the price."¹¹

It can thus be safely assumed that Cuba's actions, while self-serving, were meant in no way to impress or seduce the Soviet Union. Until recently, this has been the historian's prime explanation for the occupation. The Angolan Civil War "was to lead to a Soviet-backed Marxist minority regime gaining control," wrote Ian Greig in 1977.¹² In *Soviet and Chinese Aid to African Nations*, published 1980, Thomas Henrikson describes the "lengthy and massive aid"

granted the MPLA by the Soviet Union, as well as the planning of the Soviet Union's "extensive" intervention into the conflict itself.¹³ This view can be contradicted on multiple fronts. Joseph Smaldone, in the same book, quotes statistics from the United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency demonstrating the value of arms deals between the Soviet Union and a variety of African nations. Angola from 1967 to 1976 received \$190 million worth of weapons and equipment, making it the fourth largest recipient of Soviet aid.

However, this amount pales in comparison to Egypt or Libya, which received \$2.3 billion and \$1 billion in aid. The four nations behind Angola—Somalia, Nigeria, Sudan, and Uganda—averaged \$95.2 million in aid.¹⁴ This amounts to \$19 million in equipment annually, roughly 6.3% of the amount the Soviets offered the Cubans in sugar subsidies in the same period. These totals demonstrate the Soviets' miniscule commitment to the Angolans and also shows by comparison the level of its commitment to Castro's Cuba, which by the same token demonstrates just how uncomfortably attached to the Soviet Union Cuba was.

Nineteen million annually simply was not enough to sponsor a full-scale conflict, and MPLA officials were quick to

complain of it to the Cubans. Agostinho Neto and Castro's representatives met for the first time in Luanda in August 1973. "In this conversation they also complained of the little amount of aid from the Campo Socialista, and if Campo Socialista wouldn't help them, it wouldn't help anyone."¹⁵ Neto told the Cubans that while arms trade with the Soviets had resumed since a lull in 1972, they were very small (\$19 million, according to Smal-

done above) and were not suitable for their "vast needs."¹⁶ The amount of aid was so paltry that the talks at the meeting turned towards further dividing the conflict into imperialist and socialist sides in the hopes of gaining increased assistance from the Soviets. Interestingly, the memo describing this meeting, from which these quotations are derived, twice calls the MPLA a progressive faction. Whether or not this had any effect on either nation's patronage can only be speculated, but it is certainly something to think about considering Castro's professed radicalism and general reluctance to sponsor moderate leftists.

The Soviet Union's general disinterest in Angola before the 1980s strongly suggests, contrary to previous scholarship, that the decision to invade Angola was one made primarily

by Cuba. The United States believed quite the opposite, clinging to intelligence proving the use of Soviet IL-62 transport planes to shuttle Cubans into Angola.¹⁷ A Cuban Ministry of Revolutionary Armed Forces memo from the time shows, however, that those ten flights were chartered because the U.S. had pressured many governments to disallow Cuban use of their air facilities, and even more importantly, that those

Angola is today one of the world's top producers of petroleum...

flights made up the entirety of the Soviet contribution to Cuba's intervention.¹⁸ Another memo, written by Vice Minister of the Interior Pineiro Losada and dated 22 November, 1972, proves that Cuba was already researching the revolutionary movements in Angola, and had already received requests for help from the young MPLA. Most interesting about this document is Losada's request for a survey of the locations where battles might be fought: "We suggested that we thought it was a good idea to send some of our comrades to the interior of Angola to learn about the terrain of battle and to shoot a film."¹⁹ This evidence suggests intense interest in Angola and the MPLA, and also a very high degree of foresight.

It has been shown that whatever Castro hoped to gain from Angola, it was certainly not applause from the Soviets. There must have been something more, not only because of the four rules, but also because of the sheer size of the Cuban effort. While Cuba had always expounded the idea of violent revolution, it had always encouraged guerrilla tactics similar to those that had overthrown Fulgencio Batista in 1959. But in 1975, when open fighting erupted in Angola, Cuba sent in a full-fledged invading army. Cuba, suffering under economic depression, could not afford such an incursion based on brotherhood or the prospect of a pat on the back from Premier Kosygin; there must have been some golden incentive, some objective of incredible value that Angola could offer the Cubans.

Angola is today one of the world's top producers of petroleum, ranked 14th worldwide in terms of crude oil production, according to the United States Energy Information Administration. From 1975 to 1999, oil production in Angola increased by 500%, from \$1 billion to \$5 billion, despite the oil bust of the 1980s.²⁰ Angola interestingly enough is one of several oil-producing states wherein Cuba tried seriously to incite a revolution; Venezuela, Bolivia, and Zaire (Congo) are ranked 10th, 57th, and 66th respectively.²¹ Recall that Cuba found the MPLA

to be the more moderate politically of the three warring factions, odd in the context of that country's more common radical agenda. Is it then coincidence that the first moderate movement that Castro ever supported after a long history to the contrary was the one that controlled the oil fields? Northern Angola was home to hundreds and hundreds of oil wells controlled by the MPLA. Indeed, much of the MPLA's funding came from oil profits, up to 80% in the 1990s.²² Angola certainly had the oil, but was the petroleum worth a war for Castro?

Castro's distaste for his country's reliance on Soviet oil has already been shown, and in that context it makes sense that he would take any opportunity to break away from Soviet hegemony, especially if the effort itself would be pleasing to Soviet Union, as was the case in Angola. Castro was obsessed with the war's progress, spending up to 14 hours a day in a war room in Havana and in constant contact with his men on the ground in Angola. Friend Gabriel Garcia Marquez later wrote that Castro's "absorption in the war was so intense and meticulous that he could quote any statistic relating to Angola as if it were Cuba itself, and he spoke of its towns, customs and peoples as if he had lived there all his life."²³ Castro had not kept up with previous projects of subversion so carefully; he was familiar with Ernesto Guevara's guerrilla ac-

tivities in the Congo only by way of Guevara's diaries, and he had shown little interest in Guevara's Bolivian campaign, which proved a spectacular failure.

This evidence, while certainly compelling, is more circumstantial than it is direct. However, as Dominguez suggests with his four rules, Castro was not one to let ideological concerns overshadow practicality when it came to foreign affairs. As he puts it, "Ideology explains the continuity in Cuban support for foreign revolutions; strategy accounts for Cuba's choices of movements to support."²⁴ The decision to invade Angola was a strategically sound one; Castro could not have foreseen the length of the conflict, or that Cuba's efforts would ultimately not matter, as the Berlin Wall was to fall only about a year after the Cubans withdrew from Angola. What makes Castro's move so compelling is its very capitalistic overtones; that very sort of economic exploitation was the sort of the thing that the anti-colonial MPLA despised in the Portuguese government it overthrew. The parallels between Cuba's adventure in Angola and the United States' dubious engagement in Iraq are staggering; in both cases, a more developed nation endorses a minority party with a similar ideology, then dispatches troops halfway across the world to keep that party in power and to protect the oil

fields. If the United States' seven-year invasion of Iraq is to be called imperialistic, so too must Cuba's fourteen-year intervention in Angola.

Fidel Castro is too much of a pragmatist for the 1975 invasion of Angola to have been launched on purely ideological grounds. His opportunistic nature and rejection of Soviet hegemony suggest that Angola offered Cuba a reward worth fourteen years of conflict. An analysis of what Angola had and what Cuba did not suggests that petroleum was Castro's primary goal in the intervention, contrary to most scholarship concerning the conflict. An abundance of compelling circumstantial evidence lifts this suggestion beyond the realms of suspicion into a hypothesis worthy of consideration. Castro's invasion may therefore be seen as an errand of imperialism, a fact that suggests ideology's secondary role to pragmatism in Castro's running of his revolutionary state.

Endnotes

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