

## BACKGROUND TO THE BATTLE OF CUITO CUANAVALÉ

Former President, Nelson Mandela, remarked in an address in Havana (Cuba) in 1991:

*“The defeat of the racist army at Cuito Cuanavale has made it possible for me to be here today! Cuito Cuanavale is a milestone in the history of the struggle for Southern African liberation!”*

Yet, the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale is marginalized in Western mainstream scholarship, frequently ignored, almost as if it had never occurred. The Battle remains an obscured milestone in the history of twentieth century humanity, but its overarching significance to the liberation of the sub-continent cannot be erased. Thus, while South Africa is experiencing its second decade of liberation, there still exists a gigantic task in revealing parts of our modern history that was either distorted or ignored by the previous regime.

*War – an extension of politics*

In 1987 and 1988, in a remote corner of Angola, shielded from the international media and therefore largely unreported, the town of Cuito Cuanavale suffered under siege for over ten months in one of the biggest, and what turned out to be the last, battles of the Cold War.

Popularly known as the father of modern warfare theory, Prussian military philosopher, Carl von Clausewitz, is famed to have observed that war is an extension of politics – thus a means to an end. To this end, the former South African Defence Force’s (SADF) aggression in Southern Africa was motivated not only by its proclaimed ideological drive to stop ‘the spread of communism’, but also to contain South African and Namibian liberation movements.

Whilst still firmly controlling Namibia, dominion over the south of Angola was a crucial military objective, as the apartheid government wanted to prevent the South West African People’s Organisation (SWAPO), in particular, from getting a ‘spring board’ to launch attacks into Namibia. The strategic location of the small town of Cuito Cuanavale was therefore of huge significance for the SADF in furthering its political and military objectives.

The apartheid government and the United States of America (USA) supported the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) in its campaign against the legitimate government of Angola under the Popular

Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). The MPLA was supported by a Cuban contingent of about 36 000 and 55 000 combatants.

A SADF / UNITA military would have meant not only the capture of the town and the destruction of the best of Angolan military formations, but quite probably, also the end of Angola's existence as an independent country. But despite laying siege to the town for more than ten months and, in the words of one South African military reporter (Willem Steenkamp, 2006), 'pounding Cuito Cuanavale into uselessness', they failed to take the town.

The victory at Cuito Cuanavale for the liberation forces and their Cuban compatriots was therefore decisive in consolidating Angola's independence and achieving that of Namibia. And whilst South African liberation forces were not directly involved in the Battle, it contributed significantly to forcing the apartheid government to the negotiations that eventually led to South Africa's liberation.