

**A Far-Away War: Angola, 1975-1989.** By Ian Liebenberg, Jorge Risquet and Vladimir Shubin, eds. Stellenbosch: SUN MeDIA, 2015. ISBN: 978-1-920689-72-8. Pp. 207. ZAR 350.

“Possessing a good book”, Ian Liebenberg has claimed, “is becoming more and more challenging”.<sup>1</sup> Although his reasons for this claim is motivated primarily by economics, the statement rings particularly true for literature

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<sup>1</sup> I Liebenberg, "The Last Fighting Tommy: The Life of Harry Patch". *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies* 43/1, 2015, p. 156.

on what has become known, at least in South African circles, as the “Border War”.<sup>2</sup> A plethora of books have been published by former South African Defence Force (SADF) members over the last two decades, but nearly all of these are based primarily on personal recollections. McGill Alexander, himself a SADF veteran, identifies another defining characteristic in his critique of one of these publications by stating that the author is “unashamedly apologist”<sup>3</sup> in his writing. The few exceptions - notably books by Scholtz,<sup>4</sup> Van der Waag<sup>5</sup> and, to a lesser extent, Nortje<sup>6</sup> - are overwhelmed by these apologists.

At first glance, then, *A Far-Away War* seems to be the seminal work that Border War literature lacks. The editorial board is ideally comprised to present a balanced account of the conflict from the perspective of the main foreign protagonists: Liebenberg from South Africa, Risquet from Cuba and Shubin from Russia. As the title of the book suggests, the two countries in which the Border War was actually contested, Angola and Namibia, are not represented and Liebenberg illustrates why the war was largely fought by the foreign countries that are represented by the editors:

The consistent build-up of South African forces led to an arms race in Southern Africa, but even if they had combined their resources, the Frontline States [Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe] could not match the military power of South Africa.<sup>7</sup>

It does not take long, however, for the expectations of a balanced account of the Border War to be expelled. To his credit, Liebenberg makes

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<sup>2</sup> Although different authors use various different designations, "Border War" is the most common name for the conflict in Namibia and Angola, in which these two countries, South Africa, Cuba and Russia were the main protagonists.

<sup>3</sup> M Alexander, "We Fear Naught But God". *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies* 30/2, 2000, p. 330.

<sup>4</sup> L Scholtz, *Die SAW in die Grensoorlog 1966 - 1989*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> I van der Waag, *A Military History of Modern South Africa*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> P Nortje, *The Terrible Ones: A Complete History of 32 Battalion*. Cape Town: Zebra, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> I Liebenberg, "On Our Borders; Namibia seeks its own Destiny". In I Liebenberg, J Risquet, V Shubin (eds), *A Far-away War: Angola 1975 - 1989*. Stellenbosch: SUN MeDIA, 2015, p. 24.

no secret of the fact that this is a book written from "the point of view of Russians, Cubans and East Germans"<sup>8</sup>, establishing the tone of the book in the introduction and staying true to it throughout. It is this absolute emphasis on the pro-East (at some points even anti-West) perspective that initially seems to make the book unpalatable for the reader that has grown accustomed to the proliferation of pro-West, pro-South Africa and pro-SADF literature. Fortunately the fine literary skills of Liebenberg, who contributes the introduction and the first chapter, soon compensate for the unfamiliar sentiments he expresses. The reader is then able to recognise that the seemingly excessive pro-East stance in *A Far-Away War* is actually comparable to the pro-West sentiments of many of the existing Border War books.

As with many composite books, *A Far-Away War* is essentially a collection of 8 independent essays that share a common theme. Nonetheless, the editors arranged the chapters in such a way that there is some continuity in the reading of the book. The chapters are relatively short - the book only contains about 120 pages of text - and are supplemented by around 30 pages of photographs. Liebenberg's first chapter provides an overview of the internal Namibian circumstances leading up to, and during, the Border War. Phil Eidelberg then provides a very brief Cold War backdrop to the Border War, though he prefers to use the term "Angolan War". Whether by accident or design, Eidelberg also refers to the "Cabinda exclave" on p. 37. As this is the part of Angola that was most supported and, indeed, coveted by the West during the war, it is conceivable that the author intended to distance the Westernised "exclave" from the rest of Angola. Whatever the case, the choices of terminology clearly affirms one of the aims of the book, to move away from the almost exclusive Western perspective on the conflict. Liebenberg returns with a well-constructed summary of the "Militarisation of South African Society", blending the existing literature with informative tables and photographs.

Chapters five and seven respectively deal with the Cuban and Soviet involvement in Southern Africa. The rather odd placement of the next Liebenberg chapter - an enlightening historical overview of Russo-South African relations - between these two chapters might have been an attempt to disguise their immense differences. Vladimir and Gennady Shubin are

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<sup>8</sup> I Liebenberg, "Introduction". In I Liebenberg, J Risquet, V Shubin (eds), *A Far-away War: Angola 1975 - 1989*. Stellenbosch: SUN MeDIA, 2015, p. 14.

rightly critical of unreferenced (footnote seven of chapter seven) and inaccurate, "propagandist" (footnote 34 of chapter seven) claims in their well-researched, though succinct, overview of the Soviet policy regarding, and support for, Southern Africa. Their critique, coupled with the importance of the subject, makes the fact that Hedelberto López Blanch relies on a single footnote to reference his entire, relatively lengthy, chapter on the "Cubans in Angola" seem bizarre. In addition, Blanch seems eager to address contentious topics, such as the South African assault on Cassinga and the battle of Cuito Cuanavale, in barely disguised "propagandist" fashion.

Klaus Storkmann and Ulrich van der Heyden examine the, often neglected, influence that East Germany had on conflicts in southern Africa. Their stimulating analytical narrative is backed up by strong archival research. The final chapter returns to South Africa, with Gert van der Westhuizen, Ian Liebenberg and Tienie du Plessis providing a sympathetic summary of the resistance to conscription and National Service. While not a unique topic, the overall perspective of *A Far-Away War* lends itself to a re-examination of the impact that conscription had on South African society. Significantly, this chapter is not only focused on *resistance* to National Service, but also addresses the "socialisation" of South Africa which led to a greater degree of social *acceptance* of conscription. The book is concluded by a large amount of photographs from the Russian, Cuban and South African perspectives and an extensive bibliography.

While *A Far-Away War* is not a definitive work in itself, it certainly manages to highlight the need differing perspectives on Cold War conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa. It is laudable that the editors remained true to their ideal of writing and compiling a book from a new perspective. The very fact that the ideologies implicit within the book seem to lean so far to the left serves to emphasise the extent to which existing works lean, more or less subtly, to the right. For the most part, *A Far-Away War* is well written and well researched. The large dependence on secondary sources are understandable, given the short nature of the book. Even then, the selection of these sources is representative and they are used critically. Liebenberg, Risquet and Shubin have managed to compile a book that stimulates further reflection and research, while at the same time providing a valuable addition to the library of any serious student of the Border War.

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