

BOOK REVIEW/BOEKRESENSIE

Gennady Shubin and Andrei Tokarev (eds.), *Bush War: the road to Cuito Cuanavale. Soviet soldiers' accounts of the Angolan War.* Auckland Park: Jacana Media (Pty) Ltd, 2011. ISBN: 978-1-4314-0815-7. 188 pages.

Dr Gennady Shubin is a Senior Research Fellow at the African Institute in the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow. He has co-authored and published various books, in particular on the history of South Africa (SA), the Anglo Boer War (1899-1902) and various memoirs of the Angolan War (1966-1989). Given his interest in and other publications on this subject, this book can be considered to be a useful contribution. Among all his previous publications, this is only the second of his six on the Angolan War, which was translated into English. One cannot help but wonder why his previous works were not translated into English or Afrikaans for the South African reader.

Dr Andrei Tokarev is Head of the Centre for South African Studies at the Africa Institute in Moscow and Associate Professor at the Military University in Moscow who experienced deployment in Angola during the 1970s.

In response to the large number of publications from South African authors that participated in the Border War, this book sets out to offer a detailed glimpse into the experiences of one of the opposing sides that participated in this war. The contribution under review consists of compilations of various Soviet advisors to the Angolan Army, and to call the book interesting, to say the least, is an understatement. In addition, the publication boasts a list of major weaponry and equipment that were used and so-called “corrections” on losses and especially on the outcome of the war, which is arguably called a military stalemate. The various pictures in the book and its story-telling approach aim at taking the reader on a vivid quest in order to relive the experiences and nostalgia of the Soviet soldiers during that period.

In the introductory segment, Vladimir Anatoliyevich Varganov shares his experiences during the first group deployment in the southern parts of Angola. He states that the advisor's task was to provide combat-ready personnel for all the units as well as the instructions needed to perfect their tasks. This proved a very daunting task, given the lack of skilled personnel, literacy and challenges with offensive and defensive manoeuvres, such as how to shoot properly and also issues related to general weapons maintenance. In addition, another claim is made that no proper organisation was present initially – problems which the advisors took upon themselves to fix, among others through the setting up of schools for the training of staff officers, which was a cardinal focus in their mission.

In the second section Vladimir Kostrachenkov mentions that he assisted with the establishment of the Pechora anti-aircraft system, because, as he puts it, “it

became clear that the Angolan army couldn't really conduct military activities without either normal air support or anti-aircraft defences" (p.18). Before, he claims, South Africans could do as they liked within the airspace without any real opposition from the Angolan forces. Here he highlights incidents where purely civilian targets were shot down – something he attributes to either poor intelligence or the South African Defence Force (SADF) trying to teach the Angolans a lesson. He further points out various power struggles within the FAPLA and MPLA, which led to the Cubans taking over control of the Pechora systems; this ultimately led to two SAAF planes being shot down, making the SADF more cautious in its air operations.

In the segment by Vyacheslav Mityaev, various criticisms of the Angolan army are highlighted – criticisms that are apparent throughout the book. One point of criticism is that the Angolans initially did not know the basics of what they were doing. They did not clean their guns and knew little about offensive strategies, carrying out raids, etc. Hence, all their subsequent training fell into the more experienced arms of the Soviet advisors. Another common theme is the view of the advisors that the Angolans were cowards and an overall lack of patriotism is illustrated by various quotes: "They aren't really brave soldiers" (p. 27); "cowardliness of the officers" (p. 40); "But the worst was when the Angolans turned to flight and began to throw away their equipment" (p. 41); SA launching an artillery bombardment "...and all the Angolans would run for cover, including the anti-aircraft gunners" (pp. 47, 82).

Mityaev also claims that SA lost five tanks instead of the four they admitted (p. 31), which led Fidel Castro to mocking the South Africans because the SADF had conducted their offensive in March, which is the rainy season and not suitable to such tactics. Another claim, which will surely (and hopefully) lead to more publications, is the comment that the battle of Cuito Canavale, although classified as a draw, was in fact lost by the SADF (see point 18). Lastly, he mentions a report that he typed detailing the aim, progress and all other relevant data related to the operation, with a chapter devoted entirely to the SADF actions, which was subsequently translated into Portuguese. This report, he claims, may well exist in the archives of the Angolan Ministry of Defence Archives.

Another interesting part of this book is the Combat Diary kept by Igor Zharkin, which contains various secret radio telegrams. Vivid pictures are portrayed by his diary, giving interesting accounts of the conflict. It is also very informative, and in spite of his disobedience in keeping such a diary, it is an invaluable piece of information. FAPLA is criticised for miscalculations, mistakes and an overall sluggish offensive, while the SADF is said to have skilfully exploited these shortcomings. Here, once again, the Angolans are criticised for their lack of bravery – fleeing and throwing away their equipment as they were running away from attacks of the SADF, trembling with fear and afraid to start any counteractions

following attacks. Zharkin also shares the accusation that SA made use of chemical weapons containing poison gas in their 59th battalion (p. 49), a point that was later echoed in the sentiments of the Angolan Foreign Minister (p. 78).

In the segment that follows, Zharkin illustrates in a very frank manner the careful and serious attempts at soldier selections for their service in Angola. He mentions that despite eloquent preparation efforts, the task still proved very daunting for many. The interpreters were seen as invaluable, especially if they could gain the respect of the Angolans they interacted with. Zharkin points out that from the start ways in dealing with Angolans were adapted, an interesting one being the “illuminating moment of a cocktail of shouting, swearing and beating them ... but only when it’s really necessary” – only after which they would understand that they had not carried out a task properly. This method, he states, proved successful. Those who treated them in any other way, did not achieve the desired results, which they attributed to the lack of insight into the so-called “peculiarities of the Angolan mentality” (p. 100).

The book also offers humorous moments: in particular the part about the Portuguese-speaking cows. Zharkin tells the story of how the engineering inspector asked them why they had not mined their operational area at night and removed the mines in the mornings for security reasons. On an answer that the local civilian population stays around the same area with their cows and goats, which sometimes roam around unattended, the engineer responded in a matter of fact way, that warning signs in Portuguese stating “Watch out for mines” (p. 119), would do the job. This led to Zharkin quipping: “But of course, and then the cows will go and read the signboards in Portuguese” (p. 119). Further, on inspection of the minefield, Zharkin tells of how they summarily had to show the Angolans how to maintain these mines, which provided much fun to the Angolans, who thought it to be “playing with alarm clocks” (p. 121).

For the reader with an avid interest in weaponry, the book offers an appendix of major weaponry employed by the SADF, UNITA, Soviet/Cuban and FAPLA forces. References to weaponry are also used by the various contributors throughout the book. Equally interesting is the detailed endnote section, which, even if this is the first publication on the battle of Cuito Canavale you may have read, you would find extremely informative and useful. One such point (mentioned in Shubin’s other contribution) is the supposed contribution of a General Vassily Shakhnovich, a so-called famous chemical expert, that conducted chemical war against UNITA and the SADF troops. The point is yet again made that Shakhnovich neither existed nor participated in the war. Opposed to this, as mentioned above, the SADF is accused of employing chemical weaponry in the battle.

The addition of the editor, Gennady Shubin (in Appendix 1), is extremely interesting. One hopes that it will spark further publications on this matter. Shubin

discusses a table of losses and the outcome of the SADF (Ret) General Jannie Geldenhuys's memoir, *A general's story: From an era of war and peace* (1995), on p. 190. Shubin states that he doubts the accuracy of these figures in the Geldenhuys memoir, especially in terms of SADF aircraft losses. Geldenhuys is criticised for making either intentional or unintentional mistakes related to FAPLA, the Cubans and SWAPO. Perhaps the most fascinating is the claim that the General "minimised the threat of Fidel Castro to seize the whole of Namibia to resolve the outcome of the war" (pp. 190-191). In conclusion, the SADF had two choices: "To be kicked out of Namibia by the Cubans or to sign the peace agreement that would herald Namibian independence and allow themselves a face-saving disengagement" (p. 191). Shubin mentions that Zharkin's statement that if the roles were reversed, and the Soviet or Cuban armies were to have occupied the area instead of the Angolan armies, having launched an attack on the SADF from September 1987, it would have taken them "at most six months" to expel the South African forces from Southern Angola. Here arguably the editors and authors enter the realm of speculation and others may surely differ from them.

The aim of this book review is not only to criticise the accounts of the Soviet advisors. The review is also meant to highlight the critical value of the so-called "history from below" in dealing with personal accounts of soldiers. Often it is written to share the experiences of soldiers, which is of cardinal importance for future safe-keeping and searching for the truth amidst the fog of war. However, the work often becomes entangled with allegations and pompousness related to seeking victory and the back and forth "paper war". Despite the criticisms, these accounts are extremely important to broaden the picture and understanding of the war that so many experienced first-hand.

The book surpasses what it sets out to do, namely to offer a glimpse into the experiences, problems and coping mechanisms used by the Russian advisors during their stay in Angola, of which little enough is known today. The work is detailed and very well written and, at times, even surprises the reader with the various statements and insights into the conflict. The amendments and statements leave one with much to ponder about. If this book is overlooked when studying the battle of Cuito Canavale, it would really be an injustice to a broader understanding of that battle. Hopefully this publication will lead to further inquiry into and publications of this nature, or even the translation of more memoirs into English. After all, to achieve academic and professional military thinking, one cannot only look at one side of a coin.

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