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Closing Argument

A Long Walk to the Right Side of History

Alexa van Sickle

I

When Nelson Mandela died aged 95 on 5 December 2013, world leaders rushed to pay tribute to him. Of course, it did not go unnoticed, in social or traditional media, that this included many who had once been less enthusiastic about his cause.

Some of this opposition was ideological. When Mandela was released in 1990, Margaret Thatcher's conviction that he was a communist was reinforced when in his speech he praised the South African Communist Party (SACP). She feared that the African National Congress (ANC) was a revolutionary socialist organisation that wanted to destroy South Africa's capitalist economy. This sentiment was shared by many on the right of the Conservative Party. Mandela was branded a terrorist because of his armed struggle, and a communist because the Soviet Union supported the ANC and the SACP was a strong domestic ally. Ronald Reagan said in 1981 that the apartheid regime was 'strategically essential to the free world', and in 1985 vetoed a bipartisan bill to impose sanctions on the regime; Dick Cheney was among Reagan's supporters on this issue. Cheney has since said he does not regret his position, but went on to call Mandela 'a great man'.¹

But as late as 2003, Dave Kopel wrote in the *National Review* that Mandela's anti-American stance on the Iraq War issue 'should come as no surprise, given his long-standing dedication to Communism and praise for terrorists'.²

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In the days following his death, it became clear that his evolution from shepherd to student, lawyer, terrorist, prisoner, politician and, finally, global elder statesman had – by near-universal consensus – earned him a place on the right side of history. *New York* magazine noted that the phrase ‘the wrong side of history’ is overused – applied to everything from opposition to same-sex marriage to musicians resisting technological change – but it is apt in this case. Mandela’s memorial service rivalled that of Winston Churchill or John F. Kennedy, drawing an array of world leaders that included Cuban President Raúl Castro and US President Barack Obama.³

Some US conservatives, among them Newt Gingrich and Ted Cruz, also wrote tributes. Cruz’s statement drew vitriolic criticism on his Facebook page, and Gingrich was surprised that he had to defend his description of Mandela as a great leader. Many American critics invoke the statement of support Mandela made for Fidel Castro, Muammar Gadhafi and Yassir Arafat in 1990.⁴

That Mandela and Fidel Castro had a warm relationship is no secret. Mandela read about the Cuban Revolution while in his cell at Robben Island, and drew inspiration from its appeals to social justice, as well as the armed struggle. He was particularly impressed by how much help Cuba gave the liberation movement in Angola. In the strategic environment of the time, the causes of the ANC and the Cuban revolutionary movement dovetailed. As University of Denver lecturer Arturo Lopez-Levy has said, Mandela personified ‘the intersection of two important currents: progressive tendencies toward the decolonization of Asian, African, and Latin American people in the second half of the 20th century, and the movement toward democratization and human rights’.⁵

Fidel Castro was a guest of honour at Mandela’s presidential inauguration. Cuba was one of the first critics of apartheid in international forums, and the outlawed ANC received support and resources from the country. In the late 1960s, Cuba supplied the organisation’s military wing – Umkhonto we Sizwe, or the MK – with arms. At Mandela’s memorial service in Soweto, Raúl Castro was introduced as a president of ‘a tiny island, a people who liberated us’.⁶

II

The ANC's links with the SACP, with which Mandela co-founded the MK, is well-trodden ground, although academics argue over the extent to which the alliance was pragmatic or ideological for him. Mandela was accused and then cleared of being a communist in his 1956–60 treason trial, but the charge was made again, and stuck, in the later Rivonia trial, where part of his conviction was for the conduct of 'guerrilla warfare for the purpose of violent revolution ... to further the objects of communism'.⁷

Born in 1918, Mandela lived through the beginning and the end of the Cold War, and decades on either side. The conflict shaped various aspects of the anti-apartheid struggle. Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher cited strategic concerns in their opposition to sanctions on the South African regime, believing that it was necessary to repel the Soviet threat in Africa, although as the Cold War dimmed, their strategy shifted.

The end of apartheid is credited to a number of factors, including economic sanctions; diplomatic isolation; international activism; the brutality of the regime and its subsequent loss of allies; and the end of the Cold War. During a visit to Cuba months after his release in 1990, however, Mandela described a battle in southern Angola as being a crucial milestone.

From 1975 until 2002, Angola was ravaged by a bloody civil war, involving an independence struggle that was for a time shaped by US–Soviet rivalry. In 1975 Angola's communist Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) gained independence from Portugal in an armed struggle, having received military assistance from Cuba. Angola descended into civil war soon after as another guerrilla group, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) – which was backed by South Africa and the United States – challenged the MPLA.

In 1987–88 Cuban troops fought – without Soviet approval – alongside the MPLA against the South African Defence Force (SADF) along the Namibia–Angola border. The battle of Cuito Cuanavale, which took place between September 1987 and July 1988, began when Cuban soldiers and the MPLA's military wing, the People's Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (FAPLA), advanced from the remote town into southeastern Angola to attack UNITA at Mavinga, causing the SADF to intervene on

UNITA's behalf. At the time, it was the biggest battle on African soil since the Second World War. Cuban soldiers, FAPLA and the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), a Namibian liberation movement, drove SADF troops back into Namibia, which was then occupied by South Africa.

Mandela later described the battle as 'a turning point for the liberation of our continent and my people', as well as for the Angolan Civil War and the struggle for Namibian independence.⁸ He claimed that without this defeat of the SADF, the ANC and other liberation organisations would not have been legalised.⁹

But the battle's role in speeding up the end of apartheid is disputed.¹⁰ Veterans of the SADF have insisted that their forces made a tactical withdrawal and that their strategic objective was to ensure that UNITA survived the offensive by FAPLA and Cuban troops, and to prevent SWAPO from using southern Angola to launch attacks in South West Africa.¹¹

Military historian Gary Baines argues that the SADF won a tactical victory at the Lomba River, decisively stopping the opposing force from advancing.¹² The SADF had been poised to win in November 1987. The UN Security Council issued a resolution calling for South Africa, which had made repeated incursions into Angola since its independence in 1977, to withdraw unconditionally and respect Angola's sovereignty. The US and the United Kingdom supported the resolution because they wanted the war to end, but it was weak – the Reagan administration having ensured that the demand on South Africa was diluted – and went unheeded.¹³ However, the repulsion of subsequent frontal attacks at Tumpo was a decisive setback in the SADF's bid to capture the town and the airstrip. The stalemate was broken by a Cuban force that managed to outflank the SADF and advance on Namibia's southern border. (In November, Fidel Castro had decided to send more troops and weapons, as well as his best pilots, to Angola.) 'The loss of the South African Air Force's superiority meant that the ground forces had to withdraw or face the prospect of incurring heavy losses during a disorderly dash south,' according to Baines.¹⁴

He argues that the FAPLA-Cuba side undoubtedly sustained more casualties and materiel loss than the SADF, but this fact does not adequately measure the outcome of the battle. The public outcry following the deaths

of 12 South African servicemen in June 1988, when Cuban pilots bombed the Calueque Dam in southern Angola, confirmed that the rising casualties were politically problematic for the apartheid government and made a withdrawal prudent.¹⁵

Although the SADF insisted that it was never defeated, the political system of white power and privilege that it had defended for so long was dismantled soon after. Pretoria was obliged to accept SWAPO in Namibia, after many years of fighting the organisation. For its part, the ANC insisted that the victory at Cuito Cuanavale had strengthened its hand in the New York Accords, under which Cuba and South Africa withdrew from Angola, and South West Africa gained its independence from South Africa. Cuban sources also credit the battle with a major role in ending apartheid.

But there is still a lot that we do not know. Although Cuba's forays into Africa are well documented within the country itself, the subject has historically received less attention in the West. The relevant SADF documents are still classified. The role of Cuba in the anti-apartheid struggle is beginning to be explored in the West, however, with a recent symposium at the University of Toronto and a forthcoming book on the subject, by Isaac Saney, entitled *From Soweto to Cuito Cuanavale: Cuba, the War in Angola and the End of Apartheid*.

III

In a broader context, the Cold War in parts of Africa ended with left-wing or liberation movements prevailing. Looking back, it is clear that what sets Mandela apart from other leaders, whose cause he once shared, is what he did after taking power. Following the wave of independence movements – buoyed by the causes of sovereignty and human rights – in Africa, Latin America, Asia and elsewhere, some formerly oppressed parties and individuals became oppressors within a decade of gaining power, often legitimising their leadership by invoking the rhetoric of their liberation struggle and anti-colonialism.

Namibia has been governed by SWAPO since 1990. The organisation's leader, Sam Nujoma, was elected as the country's first president, and changed the constitution to allow him to run for a third term in 1999. In

2005 he was replaced as SWAPO leader by what many believe was a hand-picked successor. Namibia has a 27% unemployment rate, is in dire need of land reform and the ruling class presides over an extraction economy that is of little benefit to the population.¹⁶

Since gaining independence in 1975, Angola has been ruled by the MPLA. The party's leader, José Eduardo dos Santos, has been Angola's president since 1979, and is accused by human-rights groups of ordering the killing of opponents and exploiting the country's oil wealth for his own gain.¹⁷

Robert Mugabe, since winning a landslide election victory after Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980, has presided over a disastrous land-redistribution programme, run what was one of the continent's most robust economies into the ground and committed countless human-rights abuses and electoral fraud. In Cuba itself, although the socialist revolution did implement some admirable advances in social justice, education and health, Fidel Castro had for decades led through repressive one-party rule, overseeing a stagnant, centrally planned economy that made daily life a struggle for many Cubans.

When Mandela was released in 1990, an editorial in conservative American magazine the *National Review* questioned 'whether [he] is a genuine democrat or, like so many leaders of liberation movements who have come before him, the beguiling salesman of one-party tyranny'.¹⁸

During the negotiations for the post-apartheid transition, the political skill of both Mandela and F.W. de Klerk, the apartheid government's last president, in keeping their unruly – and far less conciliatory – factions in line helped to avoid the violence and unrest that many predicted. De Klerk, for his part, recognised that his party's rule had become untenable, while Mandela knew that in order to draw a line under South Africa's cycle of oppression and mistrust, he had to forgive all. Both sides made many concessions in coming to a political settlement for the country's future governance. Mandela and de Klerk were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993.

After being elected in 1994, Mandela served only one term, as promised. His presidency was certainly not perfect. In later years, he was too

loyal to the corrupt or inept, which, unfortunately, includes the present-day ANC. But he did not attempt to take revenge on his oppressors, or rule by exploiting divisions. That this example is not being followed by many of the leaders that came after him in South Africa, or elsewhere, is a further tragedy.

Notes

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- 3 Michael Brick, "'Wrong Side of History' Seems to Be on the Right Side of It', *New York*, 6 December 2013, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2013/12/wrong-side-of-history-is-on-right-side-of-it.html>.
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- 5 Arturo Lopez-Levy, 'Mandela in Miami', *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 23 July 2013, <http://fpif.org/mandela-in-miami/>.
- 6 Matthew Weaver and Paul Owen, 'Nelson Mandela's Memorial Service: As It Happened', *Guardian*, 10 December 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/blog/2013/dec/10/nelson-mandelas-memorial-service-live-updates>.
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- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Gary Baines, 'Replaying Cuito Cuanavale', *History Today*, vol. 62, no. 9, 2012, <http://www.historytoday.com/gary-baines/replaying-cuito-cuanavale>.
- 13 US Assistant Secretary for Africa Chester Crocker reassured Pretoria's ambassador that 'the resolution did not contain a call for comprehensive sanctions and did not provide for any assistance to Angola. That was no accident, but a consequence of our own efforts to keep the resolution within bounds.' Piero Gleijeses, 'Conflicting Versions: Cuba, the United States and

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- ¹⁴ Baines, 'Replaying Cuito Cuanavale'.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Namibia Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, 'The Namibia Labour Force Survey 2012 Report', April 2013, http://www.nsa.org.na/files/downloads/12c_The%20Namibia%20Labour%20Force%20Survey%202012%20Report.pdf.
- ¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, 'Angola', <http://www.hrw.org/angola>; Human Rights Watch, 'Angola: Officials Implicated in Killing Protest Organizers', 22 November 2013, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/11/22/angola-officials-implicated-killing-protest-organizers>; 'Mine, All Mine', *Economist*, 10 February 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/18118935>.
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