

Angola's Marxists Remember

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"The MPLA knows the Soviet Union turned a cold shoulder on them once and that they can do it again. They just want their help to win this war. And the Soviets don't want a colony in Angola, they would just like a tiny 'garden' on Angola's southern Atlantic coastline."

This is the brusque assessment offered by one East European journalist in Angola of the Soviet relationship with the Marxist-oriented Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola.

Soviet support for the Popular Movement began late in the 1950s when the movement was founded in Luanda, Angola's capital. Throughout the 1960s, the Popular Movement received Soviet weapons for its guerrilla war against the Portuguese colonial regime.

The Soviets also trained a number of Popular Movement men like "Bakalov," a

commander now serving on the northern front in Angola. He learned his military strategy in Bulgaria. Others spent time in Russia.

But Soviet aid was never enough to bring the movement victory.

At the time of the revolution in Portugal, the Popular Movement, like the two other movements, the National Front for the Liberation of Angola and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), could see only a long, long war ahead, having been contained to pockets of resistance in sparsely populated areas by the Portuguese forces. Portugal was saying the war in Angola had been won.

According to Western diplomatic sources in Luanda, the Soviets had all but stopped their aid to the Popular Movement, having decided they were fighting a losing battle. Not even the Soviets were expecting the turnabout in Portugal's dictatorship that led to Angola's independence.

Exactly when the Soviet Union decided to recommit itself in Angola is not known. When Popular Movement soldiers began to appear in Luanda in November 1974, they carried Soviet weapons. In contrast to their major rivals, the National Front, they were short on cash but had a surplus of arms.

In March and April, the Russians airlifted both heavy and light armament to the People's Republic of the Congo, for shipment to the Popular Movement. The material was moved down to Angola in small ships including two landing crafts the Popular Movement had purchased.

Throughout the summer, arms continued to be brought in by ships and occasionally by small planes from both the Congo-Brazzaville and, according to one London newspaper report, from Dar es Salaam as well.

Several times the shipments

were discovered and the Popular Movement defended its actions by saying that they had to protect themselves from the arms the National Front was importing across Angola's northern border with Zaire. The Portuguese never took effective measures to prevent any of the arms pouring into Angola.

During the summer of 1975, Western diplomats in Luanda heard recurring reports that Soviet military advisers were helping Popular Movement troops inside Angola. One group reportedly was based at the movement's camp at Massangano, 120 miles southeast of Luanda.

A Scandinavian journalist reportedly told a colleague he had seen some Soviet advisors on visits to Popular Movement camps and had

When Soviets Dumped Them

thought there were "hundreds" in Angola.

When the Portuguese left Angola at independence all subterfuge was dropped and the Soviet presence escalated. Almost daily, Soviet-made transport planes brought men and materiel into Luanda's airport. At the port, Cuban, Russian, Polish, Somalian, Greek ships off-loaded light tanks, trucks, Jeeps, Sam-7 missiles and 120-mm rocket launchers. A team of Soviet technicians arrived in Luanda to work at the airport and at other former Portuguese military communications facilities.

A delegation from the Soviet embassy in Brazzaville attended the Popular Movement's independence ceremonies bringing a message of immediate

recognition for the Popular Movement's government.

When the Cubans made their commitment to the Popular Movement is not exactly known. One Popular Movement minister made a visit to Cuba in the spring of 1975 and returned with a message of solidarity with the Angolan people from Fidel Castro and a promise to visit Angola when it was independent.

While reports circulated that Cuban advisors were helping in Luanda as early as April and May, as late as July Portuguese authorities were still denying their presence in Angola.

The Cubans remained elusive until August, when the Popular Movement swept its rivals from most of the urban

areas. UNITA began to claim it was fighting against Cubans and not other Angolans.

A few hundred Cubans disembarked in August at Benguela and in October an estimated 700 got off another ship at Porto Amboim, 120 miles south of Luanda.

Two days prior to independence, a Cuban plane landed at Luanda airport with a load of recruits. When the National Front made its push to the outskirts of Luanda in October, Cubans organized the defense of the city at Quifangondo, just twelve miles north of the capital.

According to U.S. sources in Washington and observers in Luanda, it was the Cubans who kept the National Front out of Luanda on independence day.

As with the Soviets, the Cuban presence shed all pretense at secrecy as soon as the Portuguese left.

Thousands of troops disembarked openly at Luanda's port. Soviet supplies were off-loaded and transported mainly by Cuban soldiers. Cuban pilots flew the Popular Movement's aircraft, while living at the former Portuguese air force base in Luanda.

The Soviet and Cuban involvement with the Popular Movement in Angola has gone so far that an abrupt reversal would leave other Soviet allies gaping. The Soviets clearly cannot leave Angola now unless they are given the opportunity for a face-saving exit.