

Africa: Between East and West - the Cold War's Legacy in Africa

DOHA, February 23, 2016 (Al-Jazeera) -- Though often absent from retellings of the Cold War, the interventions and alliances conceived in Southern Africa between the 1960s and 1980s, had a profound and sometimes devastating impact.

Newly independent nations such as Angola, Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) provided the stages for some of the most bloody proxy battles between "East" and "West", as the United States, apartheid-era South Africa and China tried to prevent the spread of communism in the global south, while Cuba and the Eastern Bloc sought to support it.

This month, as part of its "Red Africa" research project, Calvert 22 , a London-based, Russian-financed foundation, presents "Things Fall Part", a nostalgic exhibition of various artworks drawing on the legacy of the "friendships between Africa, the Soviet Union and related countries during the Cold War".

A closer reading of the objects on display, however, reveals a nuanced and conflicted history, the impact of which is still palpable today.

From 1960, the Soviet Union became involved in several Marxist, African struggles, providing political support, weapons and military training, including to the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) in their fight against the Portuguese.

But, as in the neighbouring DRC, Soviet support alone was not enough to secure power.

Between East and West

In 1975, when the Portuguese made a clumsy exit from Angola, the MPLA was already embroiled in a war against two rival movements (the FNLA and UNITA), funded by the CIA,

Zaire (now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo or DRC), and the South African apartheid regime - none of whom were keen to see an African, Marxist party take power in oil-rich Angola.

But Fidel Castro knew that the US, reeling from its messy withdrawal from Vietnam, would not be drawn openly into another foreign war. Starting then, the Cuban 'Operation Carlota', to support the MPLA, was to change the course of history in southern Africa.

"The Cuban mission was represented as a noble and selfless act of internationalist solidarity with a sister state whose hard-won liberty was under threat from reactionary and, above all, racist forces," says Christabelle Peters, the author of *Cuban Identity and the Angolan Experience* and a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Warwick.

"Fidel Castro referred to the ties of blood and history that linked the two nations (a large percentage of the enslaved Africans brought to the island to work on coffee and sugar plantations hailed from Angola). He emphasised that these links placed a burden of debt upon Cubans that they were duty-bound to repay."

Cuba had already been providing low-level support to the MPLA since 1965, when Che Guevara was in the Congo, but from 1975, the game had changed.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez later wrote: "In that fleeting, anonymous passage through Africa, Che Guevara was to sow a seed that no one will destroy."

Almost 450,000 Cubans served in Angola between 1975 and 1991, according to historian Edward George, not only in the military but also as much-needed doctors, teachers and technicians.

"In 1979 my family lived very close to a camp for Cubans who were constructing some buildings in Luanda," recalls Angolan writer, Adriano Mixinge.

"The Cuban camp was the brightest and cleanest place in the neighbourhood, and they were known as being hardworking, friendly, fair and fun. They were popular and well liked."

Soon after, Mixinge became one of the tens of thousands of Africans to travel to Cuba for schooling. He was just 11 when he and his sister left Angola. He did not return for 14 years.

"When we arrived on the Isla de la Juventud ['Isle of Youth'], we were taken to different rural schools, they were all close to plantations of limes, papayas and yams. We were given two uniforms, one for classes and one for working in the fields," Mixinge recalls.

He still remembers the school's amphitheatre, where film screenings were held. "It was there, at School No. 50, that I saw Sarah Moldoror's film Sambizanga for the first time." The film is set in 1961 and depicts the anti-colonial struggle of the MPLA forces during the Angolan War of Independence.

Film and cinema

From the 1960s, cinema was one of the most important aspects of the alliances between Cuba, the USSR and African liberation movements.

Filmmaking (both documentary and fiction) in support of rebellious causes were emerging across the world, from Palestine to Latin America, and young members of guerilla movements such as the PAIGC's Flora Gomes and Sana Na N'hada were sent to Cuba to learn the language and techniques of Third Cinema, the values of revolution and social justice of which echoed the early, utopian ideals of African anti-colonial struggles.

As African movements attracted international solidarity, filmmakers went to support them, both by making films and by training filmmakers.

"I was aware of participating in a historic moment for the country. There was a sense of

freedom, of liberation, as palpable in the streets as in the Mozambicans we met," remembers anthropologist Nadine Wanono, then a student of French cultural ethnographer, Jean Rouch, with whom she travelled to Mozambique in 1978, to teach Super 8 film techniques to FRELIMO's post-independence government. French director Jean Luc Godard went to Maputo at the request of FRELIMO during this time as well. During this trip he famously criticised Kodak film stock for being "inherently racist".

The Soviet Union, too, played an important role in the development of African cinema, training some of the continent's most celebrated filmmakers in Moscow, including Ousamene Sembene, Souleymane Cissé and Abderrahmane Sissako.

In the liberation struggles, film was a tool not only to document ongoing struggles and spread propaganda, but to inspire a sense of post-colonial, national identity.

War and conflict

But the moment in which these practices flourished in Africa, was short lived. The internecine conflicts within Mozambique, Angola and the DRC, which had been stoked by Cold War powers, were now gathering a momentum of their own.

A large number of foreign countries - at least 36 according to Edward George - intervened in a significant way in Angola's civil war, which did not end until 2002.

But perhaps the most under-covered chapter in this history is how pivotal the Cuban intervention in Angola was, in bringing about the end of apartheid rule in South Africa.

Without Soviet and Cuban weaponry, and without Cuba's 50,000 troops, the MPLA would almost certainly not have beaten UNITA and the South African Defence Force at the battle of Cuito Cuanavale, in 1988.

The defeat fatally undermined the apartheid regime, and Nelson Mandela would declare: "We are deeply indebted to the Cuban people for the selfless contribution they made to the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggle in our region ... we will never forget those who stood by us in the darkest years of our struggle against apartheid."

It is easy to romanticise the "historic friendships" that the USSR, Cuba and Yugoslavia offered African liberation movements and governments, as Calvert 22's "Red Africa" season seems to, especially with so much information about the era still locked in archives.

The truth is nuanced. The USSR and Cuba's involvement in countries like Angola and Ethiopia has dark episodes too, and has been heavily criticised. Many members of the Non-Aligned Movement (which brought together governments and liberation movements from across the Global South) saw both Soviet and Cuban intervention as another form of colonialism, a sentiment echoed in some accounts from Angola at the time.

There are also political reasons that parts of this history have been airbrushed from mainstream retellings of the Cold War - not just in the West but also in Russia, which sought to downplay Cuba's role compared to that of the USSR, and even Angola, where "former adversaries of the MPLA - mainly the USA and China - have become the most important trading partners," as Christabelle Peters points out.

"Where lies the incentive to bring up an uncomfortable or inconvenient historical fact?"

The recently initiated rapprochement of the US and Cuba could change that - but on this, historian Edward George suggests a Russian expression. "The trouble is, you never know what's going to happen yesterday." **(END)**