

weather, exacerbated Angkor's water troubles.

The destructive combination of changing environmental conditions and poor infrastructure is not peculiar to Angkor. Archaeologists also attribute the downfall of the Mayan Empire, by AD 900, to a series of droughts coupled with overpopulation. "Angkor's downfall," says Stone, "may be a cautionary tale for modern societies on the knife edge of sustainability."

## OTHER NATIONS

## Fidel's African Adventures

**THE SOURCE:** "Moscow's Proxy? Cuba and Africa 1975-1988" by Piero Gleijeses, in *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Spring 2006.

AMERICANS WATCHED IN alarm during the 1970s as Fidel Castro upped the ante on a forgotten front of the Cold War by sending thousands of Cuban troops and aid workers to Africa. The arrival of 36,000 Cuban troops in Angola beginning in November 1975 was followed in late 1977 by deployment of another 16,000 troops to war-torn Ethiopia. Many observers were persuaded that Cuba was simply doing the Soviet Union's bidding.

Using U.S. and Soviet archives and unreleased Cuban documents to which he has access, Piero Gleijeses, a professor of American foreign policy at Johns Hopkins' School of Advanced International Studies, concludes that Cuba was not playing the Kremlin's pawn, at least in Angola. A 1978 U.S. interagency study concluded that Cuba was not involved in Africa "solely

or even primarily" because of the Soviets but was motivated by "its activist revolutionary ethos and its determination to expand its own political influence in the Third World at the expense of the West."

Following the 1974 collapse of Portuguese rule in Angola, Agostinho Neto's left-wing Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) emerged as the likely successors, prompting covert U.S. opposition and, eventually, an invasion by South African troops. Neto appealed to Cuba for help and Castro agreed, writes Gleijeses, because defeat for the MPLA would mean "the victory of apartheid and the reinforcement of white domination of the black majority in southern Africa." Cuban aid and technical workers also poured into Angola, reaching a peak of 5,000 and staying through the mid-1980s. Cuba eventually sent aid and technical workers to 11 other African countries and military missions to five others, including Mozambique and Benin.

The Soviet Union eventually accepted Cuba's Angola intervention, but the two countries "repeatedly clashed" over strategy there and throughout southern Africa. But the Soviet leadership commended Castro for his foray into the Horn of Africa in 1977, when he sent 16,000 troops to support Mengistu Haile Mariam's Ethiopian junta against a Somali attack. That support allowed Mengistu to unleash a "war of terror" against Eritrean rebels in the north.

Castro was willing to shoulder substantial costs in pursuit of his goals, including a possible breach in relations with the Soviet Union, whose leader, Leonid Brezhnev, "opposed the dispatch of Cuban

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troops to Angola," says Gleijeses. And Castro's adventures ended President Jimmy Carter's talk of normalizing relations with Havana. The Cubans lost more than 2,000 troops in Africa, not to mention the services of the tens of thousands of Cuban soldiers and aid workers whose labor could have helped Cuba's ailing economy. The Soviet Union supplied Cuba's weapons, and Soviet economic aid increased over the years, but "clear evidence" of a link between the aid and Cuba's actions "may lie in sealed boxes in the Cuban and Soviet archives." The linkage, says Gleijeses, "should not be exaggerated," though Cuba could not have done what it did without Soviet support.

What did Cuba achieve? By coming to Ethiopia's defense, Castro upheld the principle of inviolable borders but also propped up a brutal regime. "Call it bias," writes Gleijeses, "but although I cannot condemn the Cuban role, I cannot applaud it either." In Angola, the MPLA regime became repressive and corrupt, but the alternatives were still worse. Above all, Gleijeses argues, Cuba saved Angola from white South Africa's intervention, ended the myth of South African invincibility, and ensured by its presence that Pretoria would later accept the independence of Namibia, furthering the historic transition that would lead to the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa.