

2013

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Article Reviews

h-diplo.org/reviews/

No. 440

Published on 20 December 2013

Updated, 14 June 2014

H-Diplo Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and
Diane Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

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Jamie Miller. "Yes, Minister. Reassessing South Africa's Intervention in the Angolan Civil War, 1975–1976." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 15:3 (Summer 2013): 4–33. DOI: 10.1162/JCWS_a_00368. http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00368

URL: <http://h-diplo.org/reviews/PDF/AR440.pdf>

Reviewed by **Chris Saunders**, University of Cape Town

When Sir Humphrey Appleby, head of the civil service, said "Yes, Minister," to the Right Honourable James Hacker, in the famous British television series of that name, it was usually as a formality, after Appleby had got his way and the bumbling Minister had been hoodwinked. Using it in the title of this article does not seem appropriate, unless it refers to the way in which P.W. Botha, South Africa's Minister of Defence, pushed for military intervention in Angola in 1975 and persuaded an initially reluctant Prime Minister, John Vorster, to agree to it. Though Miller's article is now the most detailed and the best documented account in print of the reasons for South Africa's military intervention in that country in 1975, his title is also somewhat misleading in that his article does not assess South Africa's intervention in its entirety. He reassesses the beginning of the intervention and why it took place, and only mentions, almost in passing, that South Africa's apparent defeat in Angola "shattered Pretoria's hard-earned aura of invincibility" and revived "the possibility of real change in southern Africa" (4).

Miller may be right that "no comprehensive study has appeared explaining how and why Pretoria became involved" in Angola in 1975 (4). In his discussion of previous accounts, which is not comprehensive,¹ he writes that it is "indicative of the dearth of literature in the field" that Piero Gleijeses's *Conflicting Missions* is "the most useful account at present" (6). He does not tell us how his own findings differ from that account. Since Miller wrote

¹ He does not cite two University of Cape Town theses this reviewer supervised: Nerys John, "South African intervention in the Angolan Civil War, 1975-1976 : motivations and implications", unpublished MA thesis, 2002, and Rodney Warwick, "White South Africa and Defence, 1960-1968: militarization, threat perceptions and counter strategies", unpublished Ph.D, 2009. Cf also Rodney Warwick, "Operation Savannah: A Measure of SADF Decline, Resourcefulness and Modernisation", *Scientia Militaria*, 40 (3) 2012, available at <http://scientiamilitaria.journals.ac.za/pub/article/view/1042>

his article, books by Leopold Scholtz and Hermann Giliomee have appeared with brief sections on the South African invasion of Angola,² while Gleijeses's *Visions of Freedom*, which takes up the story from where *Conflicting Missions* left off, will have appeared by the time this review is published.

Miller's article stands out from the rest of the literature on this topic because he has mined a number of archives in South Africa that no previous scholar has used, has interviewed some of the key individuals involved, and has used a range of sources in Afrikaans. These sources "get us closer to the decision-making of the apartheid regime than ever before" (7), and reveal the internecine rivalry among South African officials and their different views on whether to intervene or not. Miller does not, however, examine the argument that Vorster and Botha were encouraged by the United States to intervene in Angola. He merely says that "My research indicates that the U.S. government had little to do with South Africa's decision to intervene" (6). Other scholars have argued that, given apartheid South Africa's isolation, Vorster and Botha were happy to hear that the CIA had suggested that South Africa should help the U.S. prevent a communist take-over in Angola. The leading Afrikaner historian Hermann Giliomee writes, for example, that "the opportunity of working with President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in combating the spread of Marxism in Angola was too tempting to resist."³ Admittedly, the evidence for U.S. support for the idea of South African intervention is tenuous (Giliomee's being his interviews with leading diplomats), for the South Africans were given only "winks and nods,"⁴ but Miller might have addressed the issue. The South Africans were of course naive in ignoring the possibility that Congress might at some point forbid further U.S. involvement in Angola.

Miller correctly emphasises that South Africa's intervention took place in phases. From February 1975, he tells us, South African Defence Force (SADF) intelligence and Bureau of State Security (BOSS) officials met regularly with officials of the Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) (13), and South Africa agreed in July to supply those organisations with increased military aid and funding. This was before the SADF intervened in August to secure the Ruacana hydro-electric facility on the border. Drawing upon the minutes of a meeting held on 11 August, and an interview with the then director of military operations, General Constand Viljoen, Miller suggests that this SADF action had a wider military purpose and was used by the SADF to justify further engagement in Angola (21-22). But it was hardly a false flag operation, "something of a Gulf of Tonkin incident" (21). It was only in September that the government decided to take steps to try to prevent the Marxist Popular Movement for

² Hermann Giliomee, *The Last Afrikaner Leaders* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2012), pp.121-134; Leopold Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War 1966-1989* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2013), chapter 2.

³ Giliomee, *Last Afrikaner Leaders*, p. 121. See also pp. 123-26 and 130-31.

⁴ Chester Crocker, *High Noon in Southern Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 49.

the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) from coming to power in Luanda. By the end of that month “South Africa was supplying arms and some advisers to the FNLA in the north of Angola and full-scale training and logistical support to the FNLA (Chipenda) and UNITA in the south” (27). Even this was very different from sending regular forces far into Angola. By emphasising the gradual build-up towards the decision to send in such forces, Miller tends to downplay the significance of that decision. He writes of “an escalation of means rather than a qualitative shift in strategy” (29), but what he himself calls “a watershed moment” (29) was a major shift from the earlier, limited intervention, and might have been given more attention and weight in his account.

How does one explain the South African intervention, taken as a whole? Miller argues that it was “first and foremost the product of strategic calculations derived from a sense of threat perception” (4) and influenced especially by “the emerging doctrine of ‘total onslaught’” (4). By December 1975 Botha had come to see the threat of “a Russian pincer movement aimed at certain friendly countries like Zambia, Rhodesia, and South Africa” (10 and note 20). For Miller the key to explaining how South Africa became involved in Angola lies “with the repeated recommendations from Botha and the SADF that current levels of assistance were insufficient to thwart an MPLA takeover and deny the South West Africa People’s Organisation (SWAPO) a safe haven from which to undermine South African rule in SWA [South West Africa]” (31). With Vorster apparently influenced by the pleas of moderate African leaders that South Africa should intervene, the decision to do so was “the product of a unique confluence of the rival approaches advocated by the regime’s top decision-makers when pursuing the common goal of South Africa’s national security” (31). Miller has undoubtedly brought to our attention important new material on the background to the intervention, but he has still not, in my view, produced a fully sufficient explanation of why South Africa intervened.

In the brief concluding section of his article Miller points out that the intervention ironically brought the perceived total onslaught closer to fruition, in producing major Cuban involvement in Angola. “By both increasing the reality of Communist penetration in Africa and successfully stoking fears of that penetration, total onslaught possessed a remarkable capacity for self-fulfilment and self-promotion” (32). Botha “emerged stronger than ever” (33), and was able to secure large increases in South Africa’s defense budget and an expansion of the SADF’s role in the security field. But the consequences of the South African intervention constitute a relatively minor focus of Miller’s article and deserve more attention from him or others elsewhere.

As can be seen, then, there is more work to be done to uncover the reasons for, let alone the consequences of, South Africa’s intervention in Angola in 1975. The argument that it marked “a turning-point in the fate of the regime” (4) needs unpacking and may well not meet general acceptance, though most will agree that the intervention was one of the most important moments in South Africa’s relations with the Southern African region in the apartheid era. For casting new light on this episode in a challenging way, Miller must be congratulated.

Chris Saunders is an Emeritus Professor at the University of Cape Town, where he taught in the Department of Historical Studies for many years. He has written widely on the political history of Southern Africa and is the co-author of the most recent edition of *South Africa A Modern History*.

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