

The Soviet Navy Under the 'White Sun' of Angola



A Soviet-supplied Project 205ER or Osa-II missile boat of the Angolan Navy taken in 1983.

Courtesy of the Russian Union of Angola Veterans

As the Soviet Navy expanded during the 1960s and 1970s it was increasingly used to support Soviet foreign policy goals far from the Soviet Union. There can be no better example of this than Soviet support for the nominally socialist government of Angola between 1975 and 1991. Not only did such interventions provide many Soviet sailors with their first taste of Africa, but also saw many Soviet sailors cross the equator for the first time - an event duly celebrated in the company of King Neptune!

Soviet warships had seen operations off Angola even prior to Angolan independence, with for example the destroyer *Bivalii* operating in the South Atlantic off the coasts of not only Guinea but also Angola during the period from November 1973 to February 1974. In 1974 the so-called Carnation Revolution in Portugal led quickly to the collapse of the Portuguese overseas empire - against which Soviet-backed independence movements had been fighting since the previous decade.

In Angola three principal groups vied for power. Belatedly the Soviet Union threw its weight behind the MPLA led by Agostinho Neto, with the United States and South Africa equally belatedly opting to support the MPLA's rivals - Jonas Savimbi's UNITA and Holden Roberto's FNLA. That by the end of 1975 the MPLA was increasingly entrenched as the government of Angola owed much to both Cuban and Soviet support - with Soviet naval power playing a meaningful role in the MPLA's success.

Prior to Angolan independence and the ascendancy of the MPLA, the Soviet Union had been supplying arms and equipment to the MPLA through the port of Pointe-Noire in Congo-Brazzaville. For example, on 12 June 1974 the Soviet merchant vessel, the *Captain Anistratenko*, arrived at Pointe-Noire with arms for the MPLA. Soon the Soviet Union was bringing equipment and supplies directly into Angola.

At the height of the first phase of the Angolan Civil War in late 1975 and early 1976 a significant Soviet naval force was deployed off Angola with a view to not only guaranteeing the security of Soviet transports bringing material aid for the MPLA into Angola, but also with a view to dissuading both South Africa, and indeed Rhodesia, from interfering in the war on the seaward flank. Both South Africa and Rhodesia were keen to see a government in Angola that would be anti-Communist and that would not be hostile to white rule and apartheid. The core of the Soviet force deployed off Angola from 7 November 1975 to 5 July 1976 was the large anti-submarine ship [BPK] *Admiral Makarov*, accompanied by destroyer *Nakhodchivii*. In support - given the absence of basing in Angola during this period - was the transport *Boris Chilikin* and tanker *El'nia*.

Although into 1976 the MPLA was increasingly secure in government in Angola - with the FNLA essentially destroyed as a contender for power - the threat from Jonas Savimbi's South-African and US-backed UNITA rebels remained. Angolan support for Namibia's strongest national liberation movement - SWAPO -

guaranteed sustained South African interest in interference in Angola beyond any desire not to see a nominally Marxist-Leninist government on the northern border of its territory. At this time Namibia was under South African control - a control that despite UN pressure would not be relinquished until 1990. South African forces would remain a threat to the Soviet and Cuban-backed MPLA government for the remainder of the Cold War, with UNITA persisting as a major security threat for the government into the 1990s as well.

During the 1970s and 1980s the South African navy was clearly the most capable navy in southern Africa - and would be used throughout the remainder of the Cold War struggle for Angola and Namibia as a potent tool in the South African armoury, and in particular as a vehicle for landing special forces in raids against Angolan ports and other targets.

For the Soviet Union there was a clear need for a visible Soviet naval presence in and off Angola in order to ward off at least some of South Africa's attempts to strike against SWAPO and Angolan forces, and where a base in Angola would have value in the wider Cold War struggle with the United States and her NATO allies. A major step in committing to a more stable presence in Angola was the Soviet establishment of a 'permanent' naval supply and maintenance facility in Luanda. The Soviet Navy would establish a PMTO - or Material-Technical Service Point - in Luanda in 1977.

In the first instance the PMTO (877th PMTO of the Northern Fleet) was there to facilitate the operations of Soviet naval vessels in the region. Not only was maintenance for Soviet and indeed Angolan vessels provided for by a floating repair facility that was in situ from 1978 (centred around the floating repair base PM-138 and others), but they could also be resupplied and refuelled.

Former military journalist and translator Sergei Kolomnin served out of the PMTO in Luanda in 1977-8, and notes how in addition to facilities on shore and the floating repair shop there were 'always a couple of tankers and support ships' at the small naval base - along with 'our operational squadron and a few large landing and anti-submarine ships'. The base would also see visits from Soviet submarines of 4th Squadron of the Northern Fleet, their crews being provided with tours of the city and apparently making an impression on the local population in their 'handsome Soviet naval uniforms' - a political fringe benefit of the Angolan base.

The operational squadron mentioned by Kolomnin as operating out of Luanda was the 30th Operational Brigade of the Northern Fleet, which had its headquarters in Luanda during the 1980s. At the height of Soviet involvement in the region in the late 1980s up to 11 Soviet naval vessels of the Brigade were operating out of Luanda, with three vessels in port at any given time and the remainder at sea - ostensibly protecting Soviet fishing vessels off the west coast of Africa. In 1981 the brigade was commanded by Vice-Admiral Viktor Litvinov, who noted that the brigade was not only operating in the region in support of Angola's MPLA government and as a guard against direct intervention by South African forces, but that the protection of Soviet fisheries vessels by the squadron extended all the way from Angolan waters up the coast to the Western Sahara - with elements of the squadron also operating out of Guinea.

Those vessels based in Luanda could be deployed further south in reaction to developments there. According to Litvinov, in the late summer of 1981 vessels of the squadron under his command - and namely the large anti-submarine ships (BPKs) *Tallinn* and *Gremiashchii* with the destroyer [SKR] *Revnostnii* - were moved southwards from Luanda to Moçâmedes (later Namibe) in response to South African operations from Namibia in the south of Angola. These Soviet warships - with Litvinov in command from *Gremiashchii* - stood guard at Moçâmedes in August and September that year prior to a return to Luanda, once the immediate threat to this key port for the supply of southern

Angola by air or conventional forces had been deemed to have subsided. Whilst the threat of attack by South African air and even conventional ground forces had subsided by the end of the summer after considerable international condemnation of South African incursions into southern Angola, the threat of attacks by South African special forces on ports and other installations had not.

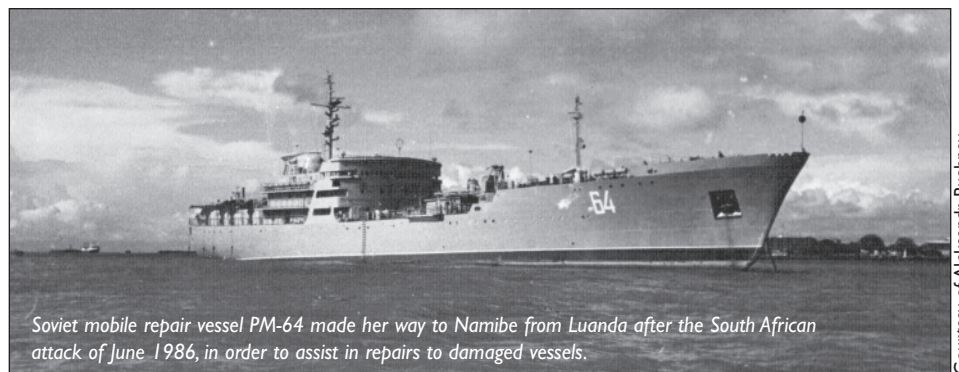
In August 1980, South African special forces of 4 Recce Commando had attacked and caused extensive damage to fuel tanks in Lobito in southern Angola, and in November 1981 what was now 4 Recce Regiment would attack oil facilities near Luanda causing significant damage. The first of the significant attacks on ships in port would take place in July 1984. Although the intended South African targets based out of Luanda - Angola's Soviet-supplied Project 205ER (or 'Osa II' in NATO parlance) missile boats - were not hit, both the 7,500-tonne East German cargo vessel *MV Arendsee* and the 9,000-tonne Angolan vessel *Lundoge* were holed in shallow water by South African divers who placed charges against their hulls.

More significant still was an attack by South African divers in June 1986 on shipping in the port of Namibe - a key conduit for equipment and supplies for Angolan government forces engaged in large-scale operations against UNITA in the south east of the country. In addition to hitting a number of merchant vessels, other targets were hit in the vicinity including fuel tanks.

There were not any Soviet warships at Namibe at the time of this attack - with Soviet warships only being sent to the area afterwards as recalled by Aleksandr Buchnev, who notes that the BPK *Stroinii* arrived at Namibe from Luanda shortly after the attack, along with the repair ship *PM-64*.

Whether having Soviet warships in Namibe would have had an impact on the outcome of the June 1986 attack is debateable - where their presence had not prevented the attacks in Luanda during the summer of 1984. Nonetheless, the presence of Soviet and Cuban personnel as a minimum provided an obstacle to be avoided by South African forces if they were not to escalate the Soviet commitment to Angola. Whilst Soviet merchant vessels were targeted by South African special forces in Angolan ports, Soviet naval vessels were strictly off limits - even if in the heat of operations South African special forces personnel apparently considered the idea.

After the November 1981 Luanda attack on oil facilities Soviet and Cuban personnel had taken some measures against such attacks by divers such as conducting regular counter-sabotage work. As personnel from the destroyer (SKR) *Neukrotimii* describe for 1982, these measures involved dropping hand grenades into the water near shipping in order to deter attacks - a literally 'hit-and-miss' measure that might have had a limited deterrent effect had it been in operation in the right vicinity at the time of a South African attack. How frequent such prophylactic measures were taken in the



Soviet mobile repair vessel PM-64 made her way to Namibe from Luanda after the South African attack of June 1986, in order to assist in repairs to damaged vessels.

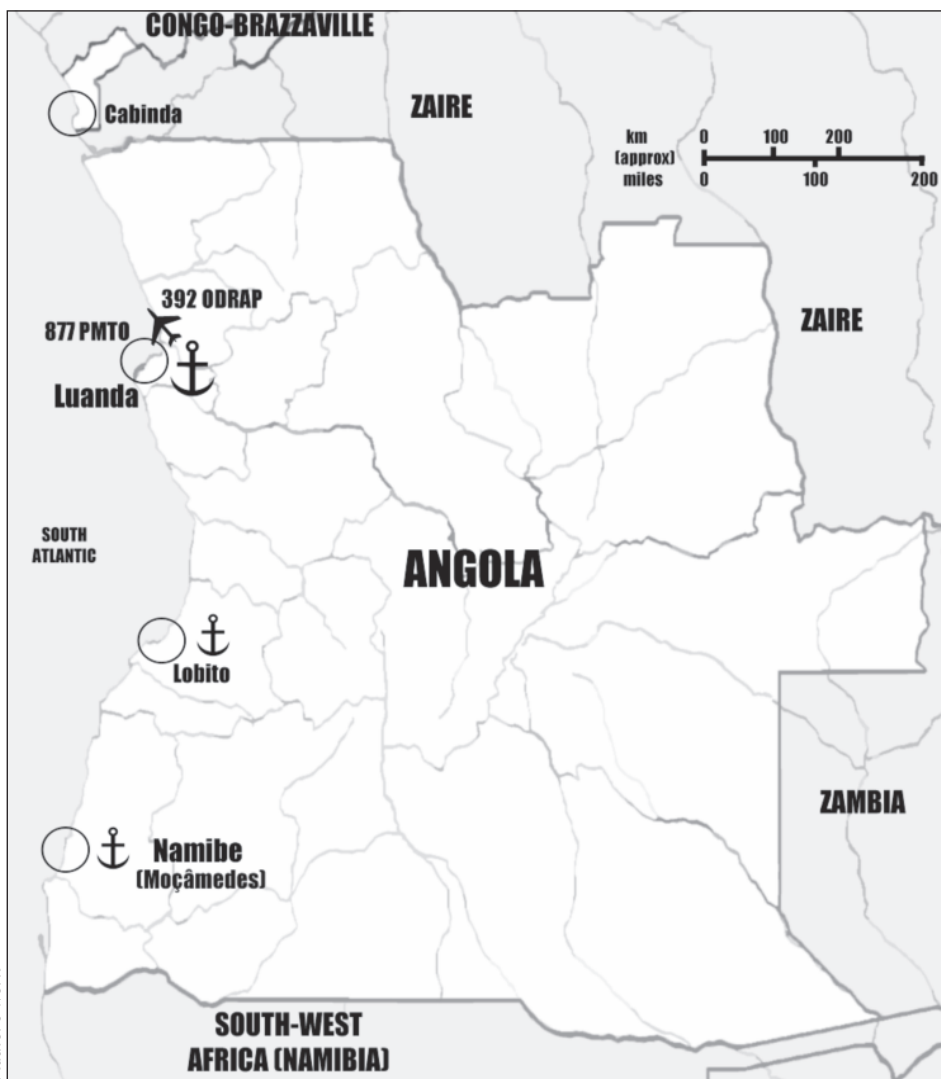


Above: Soviet merchant vessel Captain Vislobokov shown accompanied by rescue vessel Gordii at Namibe after the attack by South African divers on the port in 1986. Opposite: The Cuban merchantman Havana shown being unloaded through the side of her hull after she had keeled over in the port of Namibe as a result of attack by South African divers.



Courtesy of Aleksandr Buchnev

Courtesy of Aleksandr Buchnev



Author's work

Although Soviet warships were not permanently based out of Mozambique even when relations were more cordial - as was the case for Angola - Soviet naval visits did of course serve to highlight Soviet support for its government at times of international tension.

Particularly significant in terms of political impact - and inviting visits from high ranking politicians or even a president - were visits by major surface units of the Soviet fleet to Allied ports such as Luanda. For example, in addition to the *Novorossiisk* visiting Luanda in November 1983 the 'carrier' (TAKR) *Minsk* and 'helicopter carrier' (PLKR) *Moskva* visited in March-April 1979 and June 1982 respectively. On 30 March 1979 *Minsk* - accompanied by the BPKs *Petropavlovsk* and *Tashkent*, the BDK *Ivan Rogov* and tanker *Boris Butoma* arrived off Luanda.

When *Minsk* visited Luanda the Soviet naval command was apparently uncomfortable with the idea of flooding Luanda with Soviet sailors, limiting activities ashore to a bus excursion around Luanda for at least some personnel. Some relief for the crew of *Minsk* was perhaps provided by a visit by wives and children of embassy staff to the vessel on 1 April, prior to a visit the next day by Angolan president Augustinho Neto who asked to sit in the cockpit of one of the aircraft on board. Such a visit - involving such a significant Soviet naval force anchored off Luanda - can only have impressed the Soviet navy and Angolan guests, but also served to send a strong signal of Soviet commitment to the MPLA regime - both for its consumption, and those hostile to it such as South Africa.

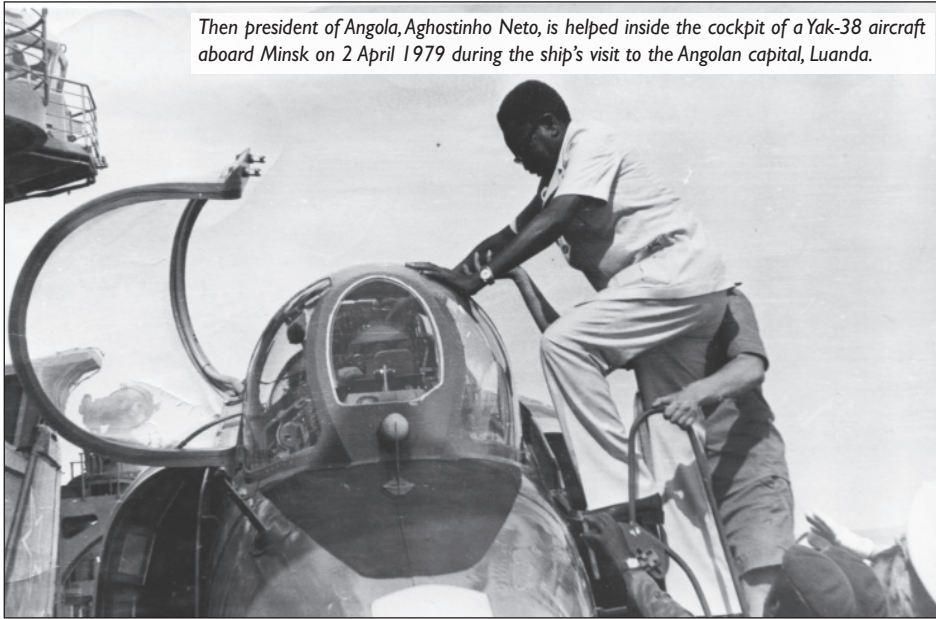
early 1980s is unclear - where during the attack of June 1986 on Namibe, South African divers apparently recall encountering only one underwater explosion during their mission - described as a 'grenade or scare charge'. It certainly seems that there was an intensification and systematisation of such measures in late 1986 after the South African success at Namibe that June. Military interpreter Sergei Demidchuk recounts considerable expenditure of grenades whilst engaging in such measures during the second half of his service in Angola in 1985-7.

The number of Soviet vessels in Angolan ports was increased by those that made visits of varying lengths to the country - often *en route* round Africa. Such visits served as a show of support for the Angolan government, and a signal to South Africa of that support. The typical route for Soviet ships in Africa waters included calling in on other friendly nations, and not only Guinea but also Mozambique. Although Mozambique started to move out of the Soviet orbit in the 1980s, Maputo remained a port of call for Soviet warships and Soviet assistance to the country continued through the period.

Above: Angola, showing locations mentioned in the text.



Then president of Angola, Aghostinho Neto, is helped inside the cockpit of a Yak-38 aircraft aboard Minsk on 2 April 1979 during the ship's visit to the Angolan capital, Luanda.



Courtesy of the Russian Union of Angola Veterans

Perhaps unsurprisingly, whilst the shadowing of this Soviet force on its journey round Africa seems to have been conducted in relatively good humour on the part of NATO warships, interactions with the South African destroyer *President Stein* were more tense. According to one eyewitness, the *Stein* did not conduct itself 'properly', and would 'get up our tail, train its weapons and imitate firing, all the while not reacting to Soviet warnings'.

In the case of the visit of the Soviet carrier *Minsk* to Angola in 1979, it was accompanied by the large landing ship *Ivan Rogov*. Security for Soviet naval facilities in Luanda was provided in part by the almost continuous presence of

Agostinho Neto's successor as president of Angola, José Eduardo dos Santos, is shown around the 'carrier' *Novosrossiisk*, sister to the *Minsk*, during the ship's visit to Angola in November 1983.



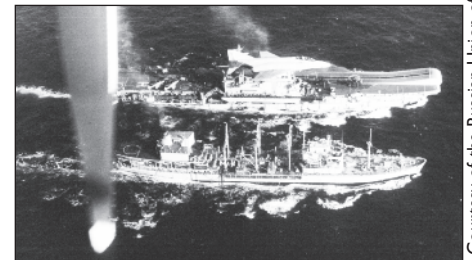
Courtesy of the Russian Union of Angola Veterans

Soviet naval infantry in Luanda - also providing some security for Angolan facilities there, and acting as an overt show of support for the government. These naval infantrymen were part of a force of up to regimental strength and were accompanied by a large landing ship. Colonel Sergei Remizov commanded the marines of 61st Independent Naval Infantry Regiment of the Northern Fleet that was sent to Angola in 1977 with large landing ship [BDK] *Krasnaia Presnia*. At the end of 1976 his unit replaced marines of the Black Sea Fleet based out of Conakry as part of the ongoing Soviet naval presence there, before being sent to Benin in mid-February 1977 in order to 'assist government in the liquidation of a coup attempt' involving French mercenaries. Although prepared to fight, the involvement of the Soviet marines was not required, and on 2 March the BDK set off to Angola, arriving in Luanda on 7 March. Sergei Klimenko recalls bringing Soviet naval infantry to Angola as part of a group of vessels including *BDK-58* and the *SKR Sil'nii* in 1986 for the protection of the Soviet consulate, aerodrome and other facilities in Luanda.

In addition to serving the routine needs of visiting Soviet warships and those based in the region with their responsibilities in Angola and for fisheries protection up the African west coast, the naval base or PMTO in Luanda would have wider functions of value not only to the Soviet mission there, but also to wider Cold War objectives. Facilities at Luanda were - as the former first deputy of the Soviet Main Military Adviser to Angola in 1988-1991 noted in an interview in 2000 - in a valuable location to enable Soviet forces to 'control the principal maritime arteries from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic and from Africa to North and South America'. Given its important location, the PMTO in Luanda served as a communications hub for Soviet naval forces in the region with its facilities

that included those for secure satellite communications. Also worthy of note in this regard, is support for naval operations out of Angola and wider reconnaissance functions carried out in the region by long-range naval aviation in the form of Tu-95RTs (Bear D) aircraft of 392nd ODRAP [Independent Long-Range Air Regiment]. Such aircraft had also operated out of Guinea, and indeed on their first flight to Luanda from the Soviet Union in January 1977 would stop over at Conakry in Guinea before heading on to Luanda.

Aircraft of 392nd ODRAP would see particularly intensive activity from Luanda during the UK's Falkland's Conflict with Argentina, where the unit conducted 14 reconnaissance flights in the Ascension and South Atlantic region in April 1982 alone. The unit would conduct a total of at least 330 reconnaissance missions from Luanda between 1977 and 1990. On 11 July 1982 RAF Squadron Leader Morley and Flying Officer Marks in their Phantom of 29 Squadron intercepted two Bear D aircraft of 392nd ODRAP that were shadowing HMS *Hermes* and HMS *Broadsword* in the South Atlantic - one of many encounters between British forces and 392nd ODRAP during the period of the Falklands War.



HMS *Hermes* and what is apparently the RAF Phantom of Squadron Leader Morley and Flying Officer Marks of 29 Squadron taken from a Tu-95 of 392 ODRAP during a reconnaissance sortie on 11 July 1982.

Soviet naval operations off Angola represented a sustained use of naval power in support of Soviet foreign policy objectives. Many thousands of Soviet sailors passed through Angola, giving many of them a memorable 'exotic' international experience. Although it is perhaps difficult to imagine, given the current war in Ukraine, not only Russians but Ukrainians, Belorussians and other Soviet citizens served together as representatives of the Soviet Union in and off Angola. Prior to the war in Ukraine there was growing Russian interest in re-establishing ties with many African nations, including with a view to establishing naval facilities on the continent. Whether those efforts continue after the war in Ukraine is over remains to be seen. ^{Warship}

Alexander Hill is a professor in military history at the University of Calgary in Canada and specialises in Soviet military and naval history. His most recent book, *The War on the Eastern Front: The Soviet Union 1941-1945 - A Photographic History* was published by Pen & Sword at the end of 2021.

Courtesy of the Russian Union of Angola Veterans