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Cuba’s involvement in and against the Eritrean Liberation Struggle: A History and Historiography

The growing availability of previously declassified material on the Cold War has allowed scholars to revisit old questions with new, more decisive, evidence. In this paper, we draw on this archival material to explore the unresolved question of what Cuba’s involvement against the Eritrean Liberation struggle consisted of in the late 1970s, and importantly why they engaged in this way, given a historical commitment to the Eritrean Liberation movement’s goals. While a seemingly minor point in a protracted thirty-year struggle for Eritrean independence, we argue that clarifying this matters for several reasons, not least that Cuban support for the Ethiopian Derg’s offensive against the Eritreans was seemingly pivotal for temporarily reversing the fighters’ major gains in the late 1970s, meaning fifteen more years of fighting until Eritrea’s de facto independence was secured. Drawing upon excerpts from the first author’s original book manuscript on this topic, we also suggest that the effects of Havana’s and other government’s denial of Cuba’s involvement in suppressing the Eritrean struggle contributed to the sense of betrayal and distrust that still haunts Eritrean politics and its leadership, as well as those Eritrean liberation fighters who experienced their staunch ally turn into an ideological and material adversary.

Keywords
Eritrea; Cuba; Cold War; Liberation History; Historiography

Introduction

This article is both a corrective story about history and a story about how and why that story was written, a historiography of sorts. Its historical narrative has been made possible because of the availability of newly declassified Russian and East German secret archives, including those at the Wilson Centre Digital Archives. Given the geopolitical significance of the region, and US strategic interest in the Red Sea and Eritrea, the US State Department produced numerous significant studies at the time, which have seen been declassified. The Russian and East German archives include reports of communications between Russian, East German, Cuban, Ethiopian and Somali officials, including an extensive excerpt from a transcript of a conversation between the East German leader, Erich Honecker and the Cuban President, Fidel Castro, after his return from visiting the Horn of Africa to mediate between Ethiopia and Somalia. The declassified East German archives - on their failed attempt to mediate between the EPLF and the Derg - have also constituted an important source of data for this research, as have records of conversations between numerous officials of different socialist countries, such as the USSR, East Germany, and Cuba. This includes numerous conversations between the
Soviet Ambassador to Ethiopia, A.N. Ratanov, and the highest Cuban military official in Ethiopia, General Arnaldo Ochoa.

The manuscript thus draws heavily on Fidel Castro’s numerous speeches published in *Granma Weekly* and elsewhere. The numerous statements and observations made by Vice-president Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, Member of the Politburo of the Cuban Communist Party, are important sources used in the article inasmuch as they elucidate the rationales and the extent of Cuban involvement in the Horn of Africa in general, and in Eritrea in particular. Articles written by different journalists, especially John Darto of the *New York Times*, whose location in Nairobi for the period covered here gave him rare access to many of the discussions and developments discussed below, have also been critical sources of information.

The declassified Russian and East German secret archives, including those at the Wilson Centre Digital Archives, were first used by Author X, who was himself once a young revolutionary involved in Eritrea’s struggle for independence, to write a book-length manuscript on Cuba’s involvement in and against the Eritrean Liberation Struggle. Unsure what to do with that lengthy and highly technical manuscript, Author X approached Author Y for support in editing it down. In doing so, however, it became apparent to Author Y that its content was not only an important *academic* corrective to the historical narrative on Cuba’s revolutionary engagement in Africa but also that the tone with which Author X had written it was a key source in itself for understanding the enduring psychological impacts of Cuba’s changing position during this period. Part of the rationale for that manuscript was clearly to enable a degree of collective *catharsis* among that generation of Eritrean fighter.

Many of the early Eritrean liberation fighters were indeed revolutionaries, who saw their struggle as aligned with and supporting Castro’s cause within a global struggle for freedom. As Author X wrote in that first, unpublished draft, Cuba ‘had been an inspiration since the earliest days of Eritrea’s own fight for freedom; Cuba’s staunch resistance of the mighty United States and its determination to resist and fight against the incessant attempts to crush its own revolution were admired by the young Eritrean revolutionaries who joined the struggle to defeat Ethiopian occupation of their country.’ As the Eritreans’ fight against Ethiopia’s Emperor Haile Selassie developed, the Cubans were there to support their cause. A handful of Eritreans, such as the legendary guerrilla fighter, Ibrahim Afa, and a few of his comrades, went to Cuba for military training; others went to Aden, where the Cuban backed, South Yemeni
government, provided support and training. All this made the events of 1977 that led to Castro’s unconditional support to the Eritreans’ sworn enemy, Mengistu Haile Mariam, so difficult for Eritrean revolutionaries to stomach. Cuba’s volte-face was thus a deeply personal and ideological blow to young revolutionaries, including Author X. It was just one in a long string of betrayals that has entrenched in Eritrea’s political leadership, and many among its population (be they supporters or opposed to the PFDJ) that few can be trusted, and alliances are fickle.

While the main body of this article is thus a distilled version of the original manuscript, focused on the nature of Cuban involvement in Eritrea, in the conclusion we reflect on what its original tone can tell us about the enduring impact of this messy politics on that generation of Eritrean fighters, some of whom remain in power in the country to this day.

The paper thus proceeds as follows. First, it discusses Cuba’s support and assistance for the Eritrean liberation movement between 1967 and 1974, when Emperor Haile Selassie was removed from power. It briefly situates this in the context of Castro’s historical support to anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist governments and national liberation movements in Africa. It then explores the tension in Cuba’s foreign policy, whereby the country on the one hand called for the peaceful resolution of the Eritrean question and on the other facilitated Mengistu’s scorched earth policy in Eritrea, which aimed not only at defeating the Eritrean national liberation struggle but also at destroying any sense of an Eritrean national identity. Here, Castro’s commitment to Ethiopia’s unity and territorial integrity translated into a Cuban commitment to provide Mengistu’s regime with any assistance “except military units” to enable them to realise their objective of defeating the Eritrean liberation struggle. The article then unravels the justifications that Cuba, as a former supporter of Eritrea’s liberation struggle, used to explain its new position on Eritrea: a position that astonished many progressive governments and movements, including long-standing supporters of the Cuban revolution that were for the most part sympathisers of the Eritrean liberation struggle.

We argue that this discussion matters for several reasons. First, the question of whether Cuba participated or not in the counter-offensive against the Eritrean liberation fighters matters for how we understand Cuban foreign policy and the nature of foreign intervention in the Horn of Africa in this period. Without the newly available material, studies on Castro and Cuban foreign policy in this period have often been driven by powerful ideological biases that have used overlapping, scant pieces of evidence to prove Cuba as almost exclusively principled or exclusively mercenary. While arguably the evidence used below does not provide concrete
facts on what happened during this period, particularly in terms of whether Cuban troops played significant *direct* combat roles in Eritrea, these new sources point to Cuba’s engagement in the Horn being driven by their commitment to assisting Ethiopia in thwarting Eritrea’s independence struggle. Second, Eritrean liberation fighters – both those in the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) – controlled nearly 90 percent of Eritrea at the time of Ethiopia’s counter-offensive in 1978 and the overwhelming majority of Eritrea’s population were living in areas under their control (*The New York Times*, July 11, 1977; *Washington Post*, April 27, 1978).¹ Cuba’s engagement therefore occurred at one of the liberation movements’ strongest moments, and yet the Ethiopian counter-offensive, supported by its new Cuban allies, pushed back Eritrea’s actual liberation by 14 years and countless lives. Third, and as discussed above, the continuing denial or dismissal of Cuban involvement in that counter-offensive against Eritrea has contributed to a form of ‘gaslighting’ against those involved in the Eritrean liberation struggle with arguably continuing political and psychological impacts. Those fighters experienced the Cubans move ‘from supporting Eritrean independence (up to July 1975), to an uncommitted neutral position (July 1975 to February 1977), to adopting the Ethiopian view which defined the Eritreans as “secessionists” with disastrous effects.’² They were nonetheless forced to confront the narrative that it was Ethiopia alone that had triumphed over them, while Cuba retained its international reputation as a principled international actor.

**Cuba’s Position on the Eritrea Question: 1967-1975**

Prior to 1974, when the Provisional Military Administrative Council (better known as the Derg) ascended to power in Ethiopia having overthrown the staunch ally of American imperialism in the region, Emperor Haile Selassie, Castro and the Cuban government’s support was directed at the Eritrean liberation struggle and its fighters.³ To the Cuban government, the Eritrean liberation fighters were waging a ‘secessionist’ (*The New York Times*, March 3, 1967; *The New York Times*, April 30, 1967) movement against a colonial force, ‘the Western-backed government of the late Emperor Haile Selassie’ (*The New York Times*, December 1, 1978), in what the Cubans publicly recognised in 1969 as ‘the Eritrean revolution…a struggle for national independence and for their liberation from Ethiopian colonialism’.⁴ Cuba’s involvement was underpinned here by the commitment of the Non-Aligned Movement to ‘respect…scrupulously the territorial integrity of all states (and) opposed by all means any aims of annexation by other countries.’⁵ They also recognised the Marxist spirit among the Eritrean guerrilla movement and its networks of solidarity with other Marxist Arab states that Cuba was
also allied with, such as Syria and Algeria (The Washington Post, April 27, 1978). In the late 1960s, Eritrea’s fight against the government of Ethiopia was thus defined as an anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle, with the Organisation for the Solidarity of the Peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin American (OSPAAL) rejecting the view, which was being tirelessly pushed by Emperor Haile Selassie’s regime, ‘that the Eritrean struggle was a separatist or religious war.’

This ideological solidarity was buttressed by military support. In 1967, Cuba first provided training to Eritrean Liberation Front cadres in Cuba (The New York Times, March 3, 1967, 3-5), and later to members of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front in South Yemen. This was during an era when Cuba was ramping up its support for African liberation movements. Following the 1966 Tricontinental Conference in Havana, Cuba indeed became a main backer of national liberation movements in South Africa, Guinea Bissau and the Cape Verde Islands, Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. Given Cuba’s expanding role on the African continent, underpinned by an ideological conviction to anti-imperialist causes, this material support was a coherent and consistent part of the country’s foreign policy. Reflecting on this period some years later, John Hoyt Williams wrote in The Atlantic that this was the time when ‘much to his later embarrassment, Fidel Castro posted a large group of instructors to train Eritrean rebels who were waging a secessionist war against the tottering Emperor Haile Selassie.’

**Cuba’s Changing position on Ethiopia post-1974**

Just a few years later, however, Cuba’s conviction about the revolutionary credentials of the Eritrean liberation movement were replaced by equivocation. With the removal of Emperor Haile Selassie, and the Derg coming to power in Ethiopia, Castro became torn about who to support in the Horn of Africa. In March 1975, Castro expressed his dilemma in a speech to the Non-Aligned Countries Coordinating Bureau: ‘It is lamentable to note that inside that state [Ethiopia] a civil war is being waged between the new government that upset the old structures and a national liberation movement. This situation is quite complex: Two causes with progressive goals are confronting each other.’ He went on to outline what he saw the Bureau’s options to be:

That is why we must ask, which one is the duty of the nonaligned? Should we cross our arms and just watch? Or should we support one side against the other, or should we incite to war? It is indisputable that we must not…We must seek a peaceful,
just solution acceptable to both sides in this war that separates and confronts the Ethiopian revolutionary process and the Eritrean Liberation Movement.  

At this point, with the Derg having only been in power for eight months, Castro was thus keen to position Cuba as a neutral onlooker and arbiter that could broker a solution acceptable to both Ethiopia and Eritrea, drawing upon the recent success of the Non-Aligned countries in de-escalating the tension between Iraq and Iran.

By 1977, however, this position had been superseded by Cuba’s almost complete support for Ethiopia’s hardline position on the Eritrea question. This became most starkly apparent shortly after the bloody coup of February 1977 in which Mengistu Haile Mariam ascended to the Head of the Derg. Fidel Castro had travelled to Ethiopia only days after Mengistu had violently preempted this coup by having its instigators shot, while in the process seizing complete power over Ethiopia for him and his loyal followers. Shortly after returning from his tour of the Horn of Africa in March 1977, Castro recounted his impressions of these events to the East German Leader, Erich Honecker, at a meeting in East Berlin. In the newly available transcript of this exchange, he states: ‘I developed the impression that there was a real revolution taking place in Ethiopia.’ He goes on to emphatically declare that ‘If we succeed in strengthening the revolution in Libya, Ethiopia, Mozambique, the PDRY [People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen], and Angola, we have an integrated strategy for the whole of the African continent.’

For Castro, the changes taking place in Ethiopia were an exciting harbinger for a socialist transformation of Africa.

Later than year then, when the Ethiopian army approached the Cuban military for support in its struggles against the Somali incursions in the Ogaden, a territory in Eastern Ethiopia that the Somalis claimed as their own, they were met with a receptive audience. The Derg was in desperate need of a new wealthy sponsor having lost the support of Jimmy Carter’s government due to the regime’s appalling human rights performance, amongst other concerns. Recognising the rapid deterioration in Ethiopia’s military situation following Somalia’s invasion of the Ogaden, and the heavy defeats being experienced by the Ethiopian military at the hands of Eritrean fighters who were struggling to regain their independence from Ethiopia, which had forcefully federated the country in 1962, the Soviets initiated the largest air-and-sea lift of arms and equipment since the Second World War (The Washington Post, December 17 1977), and Cuba deployed its ground troops to Ethiopia on 25 November 1977. Soon after
the defeat of the Somali army and the Western Somali Liberation Front in the Ogaden, however, Mengistu requested further support from the Cubans and Soviets, principally to defeat the Eritrean liberation movements, which by that point controlled most of the rural areas and many towns in Eritrea. Here then was a real testing point for Cuba’s previously impartial position on the Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict.

In a do-or-die effort to secure Cuba’s support in October 1977, and given the critical role that Cuban ground troops had played in routing the Somali military out of Ethiopia earlier that year, Mengistu flew to Havana and Moscow pleading for help from the two countries. He told Castro: ‘In Eritrea, we have lost the countryside; we control only two large towns, and if we lose them we might lose the revolution. But we don’t have enough troops.’ He pleaded: ‘Comrade Fidel, the situation is grave.’ The Cuban Vice-president, Rodriguez, later referenced and corroborated the urgency of this request in private conversations with comrades in the Socialist Unity Party of Germany: ‘Towards the end of last year [end of 1977] he [Mengistu] dramatically called on us, arguing that Cuban troops should immediately intervene in Eritrea since otherwise the final loss of this area was imminent and hence would have incalculable consequences for the Ethiopian Revolution.’

To encourage their support for such a large-scale counter-offensive, Mengistu realised he would need to convince these allies of the legitimacy of Ethiopia’s position through delegitimizing that of the Eritreans. Mengistu therefore invested heavily in changing the narrative on Eritrea, focusing on what he presented as the spectre of imperialist and Arab reactionaryism in the region. During his official visit to the Soviet Union in May 1977, for example, where he met the Soviet Leadership, including the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Leonid Brezhnev, Mengistu had left no stone unturned in trying to convince his hosts that Eritrea represented an imminent threat to the Ethiopian revolution. Archival records of this visit detail Mengistu linking Eritrea to ‘the anti-communist regime of Numeiri, and behind its back…reactionary Arab countries, first of all Saudi Arabia and Egypt’, and emphasising that the magnitude of the threat was so large that ‘Ethiopia will not overcome external and internal counterrevolution alone, and for that reason it relies on support on the part of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries’ (emphasis added), with ‘other socialist countries’ undoubtedly shorthand for Cuba. Mengistu posited that since ‘the national-democratic revolution in Ethiopia,’ the separatists in Eritrea had ‘acquired a reactionary character’ under the tutelage and support of its Arab backers.
When the Eritrean movement acquired significant ground in late 1977, Mengistu similarly told leaders assembled at the Organisation of African Unity in Gabon that “secessionist bandits put together by foreign powers” were responsible (*Ethiopian Herald*, August 26, 1977). Some months later when Mengistu visited Cuba, he gave a speech at a mass rally held in Revolutionary Square in Havana that pushed the same narrative:

…imperialism, the reactionary Arab classes and the 5th columnists are conspiring together to frustrate our Revolution, backing the traitors in the administrative region of Eritrea who are at present scheming to sell their homeland for petrodollars. All the NATO countries that have been defeated in the east [Ogaden] of Ethiopia, now turn their sights to the North. They are out to get in the North what they failed miserably to achieve in the east.21

This recasting of the liberation movement’s identity resonated with a shift that was nonetheless already underway in the Cuban government, despite its earlier ideological and military support for the Marxist elements of the Eritrean movements. Raul Valdes, the man in charge of Foreign Affairs for the Cuban Communist Party at this time, wrote in February 1977 that the Ethiopian military was ‘defending Asmara against the blows of the separatist forces encouraged by the Arab reaction and imperialism’ (*Granma*, February 7, 1977). Behind the scenes, in a private meeting with Erich Honecker later that year, we see that Castro had by this point also subscribed to this new narrative on the Eritrean liberation struggle, stating that, ‘The petit bourgeois powers are mobilizing against the Revolution. A strong separatist movement exists in Eritrea.’22 Using the same language as Mengistu, Castro said, ‘…the idea of trying to disintegrate Ethiopia by forcing it to give up its outlet to the sea is unacceptable’.23 By 1978, Castro was fully repeating the slogans of Mengistu, stating ‘We oppose everything aimed at breaking up Ethiopia…we support Ethiopian unity and…territorial integrity’ and reinforcing the narrative of Eritrea as a puppet of Arab reactionists (despite knowing that many of the Arab States objected to the EPLF because of its Marxist-Leninist stance):

In the case of Eritrea, when the Eritreans were fighting against the emperor, nobody helped them; when there was a revolution in Ethiopia, a thoroughgoing, radical revolution, then the reactionary Arab countries, and many people who had never taken an interest in Eritrea, started to help the Eritrean movement in order to break up Ethiopia.24
By 1977, Castro’s description of the Eritrean liberation struggle had thus entirely merged with Mengistu’s, as seen through public announcements and in newly available private communications, as had his expectation that the movement should surrender its own revolution in support of the transformation in Ethiopia. In his view, once the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie or, as he saw it, the ‘agent of Western imperialism’ was deposed, the duty of all progressive forces, including the Eritreans, was to join Mengistu and his regime to defeat imperialism and regional reaction as well as to consolidate the Ethiopian revolution.

Despite this rhetorical alignment, however, and as will be discussed in further detail below, Cuba attempted to avoid any full-blown military intervention against the Eritreans. The question though is why? If the Eritrean liberation movement was a “counter-revolutionary” movement allegedly promoting the interests of imperialism, as Castro himself had argued, and Cuba’s mission was to promote and consolidate revolutionary change and transformation across the globe, why did Cuba refrain from providing overt military support to the Derg to defeat the Eritrean liberation struggle? What did they provide in its place? And what explains Castro’s change in position over the course of just four short years?

**Cuban Interests**

One answer is that Cuba’s stance on Eritrea required a careful balancing act. As Valenta succinctly summarised:

> Like the Soviets, the Cubans found themselves with the dilemma of having to support either Ethiopia, on the one hand, [or]… the Eritrean guerrillas, all of them “progressive” revolutionary forces. The choice was especially difficult with regard to Eritrea, since it meant having to turn against the Eritrean guerrillas who since 1967 had been trained by the Cubans.

Part of this delicate balancing involved Castro working hard to convince his allies in the Non-Aligned Movement that ‘we have taken no part whatsoever in [the Eritrean] problem.’ Adopting any other position would have jeopardised Cuba’s multifaceted foreign policy interests, particularly in Africa and the Middle East. Castro could not afford to alienate the progressive Arab states, such as Iraq, Syria, Algeria and Libya, due to both their common ideological ground and because of the necessity of mobilising ‘additional sources of financial
assistance’\textsuperscript{29} given the severe hostility and isolation Cuba faced in a western hemisphere dominated by US influence. These States largely considered the Eritrean liberation movement to be an integral part of the broad anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist movement, and – given their material support for Eritrea’s struggle - strongly ‘sought assurance that Cuba will not join with the Mengistu government to suppress the Eritreans.’\textsuperscript{30} As a CIA document from May 1978 insightfully observed: ‘The Castro regime is keenly aware that, after having helped to train Eritrean guerrillas in Cuba in the 1960s and in South Yemen in the mid-1970s, Cuban participation in the quelling of the separatists would leave Havana open to the accusation of failing to pursue a “principled” foreign policy.’\textsuperscript{31} Using the example of Iraq-Cuba relations, Dominguez explains the delicate nature of this balancing act:

Iraq has been one of the international pillars of the Eritrean rebellion even after the Soviet Union and Cuba embraced the Ethiopian government; indeed, Iraq has specifically criticized this new international support for Ethiopia’s repression of the Eritrean rebellion. However, Cuba has a substantial stake in maintaining good relations with Iraq because Iraq has broadened its international activities in recent years. It is the host-designate for the 1982 Seventh Summit Meeting of the Nonaligned Movement and, therefore, Cuba’s successor as the Movement’s chairman. Iraq also donated $10 million dollars to Cuba to aid relief efforts after a hurricane had done severe damage to the island in the early fall of 1979. Iraq and Cuba have handled their Eritrean differences so far by excluding any reference to it from their joint public statements. But the fact remains that Cuba necessarily incurs costs in its relations with an important friendly government such as Iraq as result of its close alliance with Ethiopia.\textsuperscript{32}

When Mengistu Haile Mariam turned to Cuba for deployment of Cuban troops to Ethiopia in August 1977, Castro thus categorically and unequivocally rejected the idea stating, ‘We absolutely cannot agree to send Cuban military forces to fight in Ethiopia.’\textsuperscript{33} At the time, new evidence confirms that, during a conversation with the Central Committee of the Socialist Union Party of East Germany, Cuban Vice-President Carlos Rafael Rodriguez admitted that a large part of this related to Cuba’s leadership ambitions within the Non-Aligned Movement as well as the increasingly vocal opposition to the country’s interventions in other parts of Africa:
Comrade Fidel Castro and all the members of our politburo are of the opinion that we cannot afford to make any mistakes in our handling of the Eritrean question. A wrong move now could endanger our entire policy and important positions in Africa. We would be confronted by the majority of African states, the Arabs, international organs, probably also the countries of the Non-Alignment Movement, and others. Therefore, we continue to oppose a military intervention in Eritrea.\textsuperscript{34}

If the Non-Aligned Movement was sitting on Cuba’s left shoulder, however, pulling Castro’s decision-making in one direction, on the other sat an equally, if not more powerful, force: the Soviet Union. An important question to consider is indeed the extent to which Cuba’s alignment with Ethiopia from the mid-1970s was driven by Castro’s dependence on Soviet patronage. After an antagonistic decade, during which Cuban-Soviet relations hit rock bottom, a shift in the USSR’s engagement with Havana began in the late 1960s. This shift ultimately and intentionally forced greater alignment between the two countries’ international objectives. With one hand, the Soviet Union sought to discipline Cuba’s runaway foreign policy by significantly reducing subsidized oil deliveries.\textsuperscript{35} This strategy became even more effective in the 1970s when Cuba’s economy was on its knees, with the USSR assuming the burden of Cuba’s financial debt.\textsuperscript{36} Clyde H. Farnsworth writing in \textit{The New York Times} stated that ‘Soviet subsidies of Cuba, mainly through Moscow’s supply of low-cost oil and its purchase of Cuban sugar at inflated prices, have been estimated at $4 billion to $5 billion a year.’ With the other hand, they offset this punitive economic strategy with forms of reward, such as through replacing Cuba’s outdated military hardware to fortify the country’s capacity.\textsuperscript{37} The result of this, however, was that, as Ra’anan puts it:

In exchange for an increase in oil and other economic concessions, the USSR demanded several major considerations. Included in these were complete endorsement of Soviet policies, the subservience of the Cuban intelligence network (the DGI) to the KGB, and the acceptance of 5,000 Soviet specialists to supervise the Cuban economy. Presumably, the functions of this group [the 5,000 Soviet specialists] … were to include surveillance of Castro to ensure that he behaved himself. Thus the Cuban shift back to intimacy with the USSR was hardly voluntary.\textsuperscript{38}
This gave the Soviets an amenable and useful partner for realizing its ambitions in Africa. For a decade, the Soviet Union had indeed watched enviously as Castro and his regime cultivated relationships with various progressive anti-imperialist and revolutionary African governments, slowly recognizing the benefits that could be accrued by working with and through ‘a willing Cuban surrogate in Africa’. This included from a practical perspective, with Cuban ground troops considered to be more effective fighters in tropical conditions than their Russian counterparts, and more easily welcomed and accepted by local populations and governments. In the Ethiopian context, for example, Gleijeses cites a Reuters report that claims that the Cubans lived on friendly terms with the population that lived in the vicinity of Diredawa: ‘Civilian inhabitants of the area [near Diredawa and Harar] said in interviews that they liked the Cubans, praising them as good humoured and willing to help on civilian community projects …The people of the region also appeared to find the occasional heavy drinking and brawling among the troops endearing.’ They were praised for not ‘manifest[ing] the cultural and racial arrogance of many other foreigners’ and for ‘mak[ing] relatively few demands on the government.’ Cuban troops were also cheaper for African client countries to pay for, with the recurrent costs and maintenance of Soviet troops often too high for these governments given their scarce foreign exchange earnings. As stated succinctly by an Angolan official: ‘…the Soviets…usually demand rooms in the best hotels or well-furnished houses with air conditioning and new stoves, refrigerators, which cost us a lot of our precious foreign exchange, whereas we can put five or six Cubans in a hot one-bedroom apartment with mattresses on the floor and we will never hear a complaint.’ As Wolf Grabendorff therefore summarises:

The Soviet Union evidently wants to utilise the Cuban Third World image in order to make its own system more attractive to Africa. It likes to use Africa’s strong fascination with a relatively autonomous socialist state in Cuba as a supplement, but not an alternative, to its own orthodox road to socialism.

The Soviet Union’s inability…to act as an example for the future development of the Third World should be offset by the fact that Cuba…has been able to contribute to worldwide recognition of the socialist camp…it is indeed much easier for the Soviet Union to contain both Western and Chinese influence in Africa with Cuba than without it.
The Soviets also had strategic ambitions in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea regions, for which Cuban support would be extremely useful. They wished to create a coalition of states, including Somalia, Ethiopia, Djibouti and South Yemen that could both settle irredentist quarrels without conflict and that would assure the USSR of a continued military presence in the region. Castro was brought onboard to broker this arrangement. According to Paul Henze, a CIA station chief in Turkey and Ethiopia during the 1960s and 1970s and a deputy to the National Security Adviser under the Carter administration:

In March [1977], while Mengistu was busy consolidating his hold over the Derg and preparing for military disengagement from the United States, the Soviets brought Fidel Castro onto the scene to try to reconcile all the contradictions that resulted from their decision to become Ethiopia’s main military supplier. Castro’s visit to Somalia, Ethiopia, and Aden may have been a hasty attempt to fend off impending disaster. It could also have been a more carefully conceived scheme for maintaining a grip on both Somalia and Ethiopia that had developed over some time.

The Soviets also had tangible assets to protect. According to the US Defense Department: ‘The Soviets have furnished Ethiopia with about US $3 billion in military assistance and signed agreement for US $1 billion more. In return, USSR has gained naval and air access at Dahlak and Asmara. The Dahlak installation is a maintenance facility and supply depot for Soviet naval combatants operating in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea’. Aircraft were also stationed at Asmara airport. Bruce Porter was thus spot on when he opined: ‘Whatever the nuances of the Soviet-Cuban relationship, it is clear that from 1975 to 1978 Castro provided the Kremlin with the tool it required for translating its practice of weapons shipments into greater influence on the countries of local conflicts in Africa.’

It was not only the Soviets who saw a benefit to this relationship, however. In light of the severe embargoes imposed by the US government on Cuba, Castro and his regime were not blind to the immense advantages that could be derived from Soviet patronage. From the point of Cuba’s support for the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the two countries’ foreign policies – through a mixture of carrot and stick - thus increasingly dovetailed. Castro knew that Soviet Leader Brezhnev was broadly supportive of his views, but that intervening alongside the Soviets in Africa would shore up further political and economic support. Although a small-
scale Cuban presence in Somalia thus pre-dated the large-scale deployment of Cuban ground troops during the Ethiopian counter-offensive in the Ogaden, the latter took place subsequent to Fidel Castro’s Soviet-initiated visit to the region, including to Somalia, Ethiopia and South Yemen. As Payne states, ‘Castro’s decision to commit about 13,000 troops to assist Ethiopia against former allies demonstrated that, unlike Angola, he was acting primarily to protect Soviet interests under Moscow’s direction.’

While Cuba therefore had little to no engagement with the Horn of Africa prior to the 1970s, aside from its support for the Eritrean liberation groups, and very few personal or political ties to governments there, Castro was heavily embroiled in the region’s conflicts by the latter stages of the decade. This suggests Cuba’s gradually relinquishment of the revolution’s original goal of political and economic autonomy in favour of Soviet tutelage. In a meeting of the CC CPSU Politburo held on 14 July 1978, Mr Ponomarev, a member of the Soviet Politburo indeed informed the meeting: ‘Yesterday the Secretary of the CC of the Communist Party of Cuba, Vivo Valdez visited me. He had been in Ethiopia. [...] Vivo said that Cuba will not undertake to do anything in Ethiopia without the preliminary agreement with the Soviet Union’ (emphasis added). Even Fidel Castro admitted the difference between Cuba’s involvement in Angola in November 1975 and their engagement in Ethiopia’s Ogaden conflict in November 1977: ‘In Angola, we took the initiative, we acted on our own … It was a decision full of risks. In Ethiopia, our actions were coordinated from the very beginning with the Soviets.’ When Cuba decided to deploy its ground troops in Ethiopia to repel the Somali invasion of the Ogaden and to rescue the beleaguered Ethiopian armed forces in Eritrea and Tigray, the actions of the Soviets and Cubans were coordinated. As Ra’anan thus states, ‘By the second half of the 1970s, Castro’s unqualified support for Soviet foreign policy, as expressed in the Walters interview and in the Cuban media, hardly indicates that Soviet-Cuban policies in Africa or elsewhere, still diverged significantly.’ Payne similarly states, ‘Cuba’s participation [in the Ogaden war] also shattered the view that Castro acted independently of the USSR in pursuit of Cuba’s goals.’

**Cuban actions against Eritrea**

A major test of Cuban intentions in Africa is now taking shape. Are the Cubans merely tools of an expansionist Soviet policy? Or is Fidel Castro acting on his own, in pursuit of his old dream of third world revolution? Or, as the Cubans themselves have claimed, is their role both independent and modest, consisting essentially of
helping allied governments (Angola, Ethiopia) to repel foreign invaders? The way that Havana responds to the impending confrontation between the Ethiopian Government and the secessionist forces in Eritrea should do much to answer those questions. (*The New York Times*, April 22, 1978)

The result of these competing interests was an increasingly untenable compromise. On the one hand, the Cubans maintained a public stance of supporting a peaceful political settlement to the Eritrean question, albeit one that demanded Eritreans to sacrifice their right to self-determination in order to maintain the integrity of Ethiopia’s borders. On 6th September 1978 in an interview with Cuban and American journalists, Fidel Castro, for example, said: ‘In the Sahara, wherever there is an African liberation movement, we support it.’ The journalists present were taken aback by his failure to mention the Eritrean liberation struggle, however, and thus one journalist, Jose Rodriguez, interjected: ‘But concerning the Eritrean movement, the Eritrean liberation movement?’ Castro replied:

Well, we look upon the Eritrean problem as an internal problem of Ethiopia. We have publicly stated our position on this at the time of Mengistu’s visit here. We are in favour of a political solution to the problem of nationalities in Ethiopia; we are in favour of a political solution, in keeping with the principles of Marxism-Leninism, preserving Ethiopia’s territorial integrity. We oppose everything aimed at breaking up Ethiopia. And thus, we support the Ethiopian Revolution, Ethiopian unity and Ethiopian territorial integrity.\(^{55}\)

In a similar tone, the Cuban Vice-President, Carlos Rodriguez stated in 1978 that:

At the present time, the problem of Eritrea is one which worries democratic forces … Cuba is not interfering in matters which are the internal affairs of Ethiopia. Regarding Eritrea, Fidel Castro has said that Cuba favours a political settlement of that issue. (*Granma Weekly Review*, August 13, 1978)

This strategy was nonetheless underpinned by the ominous pre-condition that the Eritrean liberation movements should first be defeated in the hope that the Eritrean people would then more readily accept a political solution other than regaining their independence. Castro’s stance in this regard was identical to that of the Soviet Union and East Germany. The Soviet
Ambassador to Ethiopia, A.N. Ratanov, and the highest Cuban military official in Ethiopia, General Arnaldo Ochoa, for example, campaigned to Mengistu that if the Eritrean liberation movements were defeated, their Arab backers would cease their support, which would in turn persuade the Eritrean people to accept the solution of greater autonomy within the Ethiopian federation. While Castro may not therefore have shared Mengistu’s enthusiasm for a violent resolution to Eritrea’s liberation struggle, his proposed strategy concluded at the same endgame of no independence for Eritrea’s people.  

Despite Mengistu’s pleas to the Cuban Communist party for military support for their campaign against the Eritreans, Castro nonetheless officially refused military cooperation in terms of the deployment of Cuban troops in Eritrea.  

Explaining this refusal to deploy Cuban ground troops to Eritrea in a private meeting with Central Committee of the Socialist Union Party of East Germany, the Cuban Vice-President Rodriguez stated: ‘Comrade Castro refused to intervene in Eritrea. We have promised every kind of aid except for military units to our Ethiopian comrades. We have based this on the view that this was a justified national cause of the Eritrean people which could not be solved militarily.’  

A CIA report further details the path that Cuba was trying to navigate:

The Castro regime is trying assiduously to avoid a major combat role in Eritrea. Havana has temporarily shelved Mengistu’s pleas for a combined assault on the secessionist guerrillas and has urged the Ethiopian leader to make a sustained effort to achieve a solution through negotiations. The Cubans—who see possibilities in some form of Eritrean autonomy short of independence—are also using diplomatic channels to smooth the way for a negotiated settlement, but prospects for success appear exceedingly dim.  

On the other hand, however, and counter to this official position of non-engagement or interference in the conflict against Eritrea, it was clear that Cuba was heavily invested in Mengistu’s military solution for ending Eritrea’s liberation struggle, doing much else to facilitate Mengistu and his regime’s defeat of the Eritrean insurgents. Evidence suggests that not only did Cuba supply the weaponry to Ethiopia’s counter-offensive against Eritrean forces in 1977-1978, but they also provided extensive military training and engineered the military operations. In July 1977, the Cubans and Soviets had already agreed that the situation in Ethiopia demanded military support. A newly available memorandum of a conversation
between the highest Soviet and Cuban officials in Ethiopia indicates that the Cubans were from the outset involved in planning and organizing the highest Ethiopian military command in Eritrea:

In the course of further discussion, we came to common conclusions that the difficult situation dictated the necessity of creating in some form a state defense committee, which would be authorized to mobilize all forces of the country for the defense of the revolution; of organizing the highest military command, and at a minimum, of two fronts (Northern [Eritrea and Tigray] and Eastern) with corresponding command and headquarters structures.\(^\text{60}\)

The Cubans were thus involved in training and advising the Ethiopian military in advance of their counter-offensive against the Eritreans. Before 1977, the Ethiopian military was dependent on weapons supplied by the United States of America. When the military junta swapped sides in 1977, the Soviet Union became the single most important supplier of weapons to the Ethiopian military. The latter, however, did not have the requisite technical competence to use the at least one billion US dollars’ worth of weapons supplied by the Soviet Union, necessitating Cubans to step in to provide that support. When Castro was in Ethiopia in March 1977, he also made the arrangements for a Cuban mission to train the Ethiopian People’s militia, which the government had hastily pulled together to bolster Ethiopia’s professional army in fighting its multiple enemies, including the Eritrean liberation movements. After he returned from his travels in Africa, including Ethiopia, in March 1977, Castro, for example, privately told the East German leader, Erich Honecker, in an exchange that has only recently come to light, that ‘Already we are collecting old weapons in Cuba for Ethiopia, principally French, Belgian and Czech hand-held weapons. About 45,000 men must be supplied with weapons. We are going to send military advisers to the Ethiopian militia in weapons use.’\(^\text{61}\) Castro also informed Honecker that his regime was sending military advisers to train the Ethiopian militia to fight in Eritrea in what he admitted was a ‘Cuban-built militia training centre.’\(^\text{62}\) By October 1977, the number of Cuban advisors to Ethiopia had increased to 160.\(^\text{63}\)

Beyond this, the extent to which Cuban troops were physically deployed in Eritrea remains highly contested. On 27 February 1978, an EPLF spokesperson in Rome reported that about one thousand Cuban troops were fighting in Eritrea in an attempt to help the Ethiopian government to break the siege of Asmara. On the same day, a report released by the US State
Department also reported that Cubans were in Eritrea acting as ‘advisers and pilots’ (The New York Times, February 28, 1978, 11; The Washington Post, February 28, 1978, 16). Dan Connell, in an article published in the Boston Sunday Globe a month later, stated that ‘More than 2,000 Cuban combat troops have been airlifted into the besieged Eritrean capital of Asmara, and extensive preparations are under way in northern Ethiopia for a new offensive against Eritrean independence forces, according to Eritrean guerrilla sources’ (26th March 1978). The Washington Post similarly relayed that: ‘American Analysts are convinced that Cuban and Soviet military advisers have supplied strategic advice to Ethiopia for the Eritrean conflict. In addition, a few weeks ago, several Cuban pilots were reported flying combat missions in Eritrea’ (17 May, 1978). Later that year, in a news conference on 16th November 1978, the EPLF’s secretary-General, Ramadan Mohammed Nur, said that Ethiopia was launching a ‘scorched earth policy with defoliant sprays in a new offensive in Eritrea … with the participation of Soviet and Cuban forces.’ The late Eritrean scholar, Tekie Fessehatzion wrote: ‘The incontrovertible fact is, at least in Eritrea, that Cuba is expending its moral and political energy, not to say the blood of its citizens, to uphold a colonial status quo. This is a contradiction of enormous proportion for which neither the Cubans nor their allies will be able to find any justification based on socialist principles.’

In the lead up to the launching of the large-scale Ethiopian counter-offensive in Eritrea in 1978, the Cuban Vice-president, Carlos Rodriguez, admitted that Cuba had occupied key positions on an island outside Massawa. Castro himself even seems to admit that they deployed troops to assist Mengistu and his fighters in their efforts to suppress the Eritrean secessionists:

…the secessionists in the north of the country, clearly in coordination with the Somali attack, were intensifying their military operations all along the existing frontlines. It was at this juncture that a situation arose where only resolute and determined internationalist help to support the heroic struggle of the Ethiopian people would have saved the independence, territorial integrity, and the Revolution of their country.

Regardless of whether or not Cuban troops were directly engaged against the Eritrean liberation fighters then, a point that remains contested, they were nonetheless undeniably and intentionally enabling it. They provided extensive and direct strategic support to this operation, as noted above, and, through their significant assistance to Ethiopia’s war against
Somali forces in the Ogaden, effectively and knowingly freed up Ethiopian forces for the counter-offensive against Eritrea. As a US Federal Research Division paper notes, ‘the continued presence of Cuban troops in the Ogaden enabled the Mengistu regime to redeploy troops to northern Ethiopia’ and Jorge Dominguez notes that ‘Ethiopia has maintained the Cuban presence [against Somalia] to advance its policy in Eritrea’.  

Even when the Somali threat in the Ogaden was completely removed, a Cuban contingent of up to 12,000 troops remained in Ethiopia to protect the country’s Eastern border and to train up Ethiopian troops for fighting in its northern quarter. In defending his decision to commit ground troops to support Mengistu’s struggle against Somalis in the Ogaden, Castro stated that ‘Ethiopia already had to struggle in many parts of its territory against many groups of counter-revolutionary bandits led by the feudalists with aid from abroad and by secessionist movements in the country’s north…Time was short…’ (The Washington Post, March 18, 1978). In a private briefing with German counterparts in early 1978, Vice-President Rodriguez drew the link between the two confrontations even more explicitly:

Towards the end of last year [Mengistu] dramatically called on us, arguing that Cuban troops should immediately intervene in Eritrea since otherwise the final loss of this area was imminent and hence would have incalculable consequences for the Ethiopian Revolution. In close consultation with the Soviet comrades, Comrade Fidel Castro favored a massive intervention in the Ogaden against the Somali invasion.

Cuban troops were also stationed on an island near the entrance to Massawa, on Eritrea’s Red Sea coast, in the run up to the 1978 Ethiopian counter-offensive. In a rare and unusual admission, the Cuban Vice-President Carlos Rodriguez told the East German Central Committee of the Communist Party that although Cuba remained opposed to military intervention in Eritrea, ‘In coordination with our Soviet comrades we have agreed to occupy the entrance to the Mits’iwa [Massawa] Islands from where a certain degree of control can be exerted and from where in an extreme emergency a limited military intervention would be possible.’ In view of the fact that this information came from one of the top Cuban officials involved in the formulation and implementation of Cuban foreign policy, including in the Horn of Africa, its significance cannot be understated. The outcome of the counter-offensive was a function of the performance of the Ethiopian troops armed to the teeth and directed by the
Soviets, trained by the Cubans and also released from the Ogaden by Cuban troops to fight in Eritrea, but the fact remains that Cuban soldiers were definitely deployed to occupy the strategic entrance to the Massawa islands and were at a minimum on standby waiting to receive orders for frontline combat. Writing in *The New York Times* as a foreign correspondent in Ethiopia and Kenya, John Darton reported that instead of fighting, ‘the several thousand Cubans inside Eritrea — along with many thousands more in Tigre Province just to the south — are reported to have taken a backup role, providing help in logistics, communications and strategic. Whether they can remain aloof from the fighting, as it moves into the inaccessible terrain of the Eritrean highlands, remains to be seen, diplomats said’ (*The New York Times*, July 27, 1978). In this regard, the prediction contained in a declassified US Interagency Intelligence Memorandum from May 1978 regarding Cuba’s and the Soviet Union’s role in the counter-offensive in Eritrea is worth noting, while recognising that it presents an impossible counterfactual. The report stated; ‘...initial involvement is likely to consist of advisory and support activities, but if this kind of support does not bring success to the Ethiopian campaign, we believe that the Soviets and Cubans will commit Cuban combat forces.’

The result was that even if Cuban troops did not necessarily engage in frontline conflict, the bolstered Ethiopian counter-offensive against the Eritrean liberation fronts in 1978 succeeded in significantly weakening the Eritreans. Key towns were captured, and the fighters strategically withdrew to mountain hide-outs around Nakfa. Writing again in *The New York Times* about the outcome of the large-scale Ethiopian counter-offensive launched in Eritrea at the time, John Darnton stated: ‘There is no disguising the magnitude of the recent Eritrean defeat. In eight months, the Ethiopian Army undid three years of hard won, painstakingly methodical Eritrean victories, retaking every main town in the province and reopening the vital 56-mile road between the port of Massawa and Asmara, the provincial capital.’ Alongside the benefits to Mengistu and his regime from the EPLF and ELF’s alleged defeat, Darnton declares, ‘For Moscow, the rollback of the rebellion is the final stroke in a high-risk gamble — switching their backing from the rebels to Ethiopia — which appears to have paid off. Once Ethiopia has secured Eritrea's Red Sea ports, the Russians can presumably expect to acquire bases along a 1,000 mile coastline which would more than compensate for their expulsion from the Somali port of Berbera a year ago’ (*The New York Times*, December 17, 1978). For Russia, their Cuban surrogacy appeared to have paid off.

Roger Fontaine thus summarises that in spite of Castro’s ambiguous position on the question
of Eritrea, he passionately insisted that the unity, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Ethiopian revolutionary state should not be compromised. In pursuit of this goal,

Cubans moved with awesome effectiveness to ensure the destruction of the Eritreans. To be sure, Castro never publicly declared war on his former Eritrean partners. Nevertheless, Cuban advisers down to the company level made sure the Ethiopian army overran every fixed Eritrean position. By Thanksgiving 1978, the Eritreans held towns and scarcely any villages in the province. Moreover, the Ethiopian army and its allies were energetically pursuing what was left of the resistance in the northern mountains.\(^{71}\)

**Conclusion**

What to take though from this historical inquiry into Cuba’s engagement with Eritrea in the 1960s and 1970s? At a simple level, this case study provides yet another example of the sheer messiness of Cold War rivalry and geopolitics in this period and in this region. Charles Mitchell distills the complexity of external intervention in the Eritrean liberation war down to its tragic irony:

Ironically, the Eritreans have been trained by Cubans and Soviets and are armed with Soviet weaponry, given them before Ethiopia kicked out the United States and courted the Soviet Union. Now both sides are equipped with guns from the same supplier and have polished tactical skills under the same tutors. The 10,000-man Cuban garrison which once fought on the side of the secessionists sits on the side-lines with guns pointed toward Ethiopia’s bitter enemy Somalia, which at one time played host to these same troops.\(^ {72}\)

An important determinant of Castro’s volte-face was the relationship between Cuba and the Soviet Union, though opinions remain divided on the question of to what extent Cuba was involved in Ethiopia at the behest of the Soviet Union or pursued its own independent foreign policy. Fidel Castro’s official justification for Cuba’s involvement in Ethiopia was that it was a response to Mengistu’s pleas for military help. Other analysts counter, however, by arguing that Cuba’s decision to intervene in Ethiopia was to a large extent initiated at Moscow’s behest. Unlike in Angola where the Soviet Union intervened to reinforce Cuba’s foreign policy initiatives, in Ethiopia it seems that influence was exercised in the opposite direction with
Moscow largely determining Havana’s position. Either way, and whether Cuba was directly involved with ground troops or not, the logistical and military support provided by Castro at this time was one of the key factors in the success of Ethiopia’s counter-offensive against the Eritrean liberation movements.

This newly declassified information also provides a counter to Castro’s assertions of Cuba’s principled foreign policy and unwavering ideological position. He regularly projected that:

> There are some who have made an art of opportunism. We Cuban revolutionaries are not and never will be opportunists. We know how to sacrifice our own national economic interests whenever necessary to defend a just principle or an honourable political position. *We Cubans will never renege on what we said yesterday, nor will we say one thing today and do something else tomorrow.* (emphasis added)\(^73\)

While undeniably Castro did come to admire Mengistu and his revolutionary zeal, considering that in itself a ‘just principle’ and ‘honorable political position’ to promote and defend, he was also aware that his shift to fully supporting Ethiopia’s efforts against the Eritrean liberation struggle was inconsistent with their previous support to the Eritreans and thus that some reputational ‘damage limitation’ would be needed. In terms of international reputation, this involved ameliorating the concerns of Cuba’s progressive allies in Africa and the Middle East, who supported and sympathised with the Eritrean cause, by denying any active involvement in the conflict against the Eritrean fighters in the north of Ethiopia, and publicly espousing a position of non-interference. As the new archival material presented above definitively establishes, however, such as through Cuban Vice President Rodriguez’s private statements, this public discourse diverged from a reality in which Cuban officials were at the very least intentionally seeking to free up and train Ethiopian troops for offensives against Eritrean guerrillas in order to reverse the major advances they had made towards a liberation that Cuba no longer supported.

While this real politik comes as no surprise to most observers of international affairs, it was – and to some extent remains – a devastating blow to the Eritrean liberation movement, having provided it with one of many disappointing introductions to international diplomacy.\(^74\) It was an unforeseen lesson on the limitations of solidarity that further entrenched narratives of betrayal, disloyalty and distrust that still structure the Eritrean government’s engagement with
Aside from its material impacts at the time in terms of invigorating and enabling Ethiopia’s counter-offensive against the Eritrean liberation movements, Cuba’s volte-face thus also dealt a psychological blow to Eritrea’s fighters. Throughout the original manuscript on which this article is based were indeed long passages that signalled the continuing, visceral sense of abandonment experienced by those who, including Author X and the leadership currently in power in Eritrea, grew up espousing socialist ideals and who modelled their struggle on the Cuban revolution. To them, as Author X first put it, ‘Castro’s argument regarding the Eritrean liberation movement’s counter-revolutionary role was non sequitur. How could a movement that was a genuine liberation movement by Castro’s own admission suddenly begin to play a counter-revolutionary role just because a political change had taken place in Ethiopia?’

In recounting what many Eritreans saw as Cuba’s duplicity in changing positions towards their liberation struggle, the author included a scathing Tigrinya saying that ‘people who want to eat a vulture change its name into guineafowl’. In Author X’s words, the Cubans relied on a semantic sleight of hand to justify a shift in strategy that Castro knew made limited ideological sense:

In Eritrean culture, eating a vulture is considered a taboo, but the meat of a guineafowl is considered desirable. Those who want to eat a vulture may therefore lie to themselves and their surroundings by calling the vulture guineafowl. The moral of the story is that labelling the Eritrean liberation struggle as reactionary and as serving the interests of regional reaction is a means of justifying Cuban support for the Derg’s counter-offensive. Castro’s allegation that the Eritrean liberation movements were reactionary was without empirical backing.

Over forty years on, an ongoing sense of betrayal is palpable in the original manuscript. Cuba’s decision-making was not written about in the objective, academic vocabulary of diplomacy, but in the language of lies, disloyalty and disappointment. In a passage describing Cuba’s change in position, Author X explained it as follows:

Not only has Castro relinquished the principles that previously guided his government’s foreign policy concerning Eritrea, but he also bought into the Ethiopian policy of annexation. At the heart of the bloodshed and destruction in
Eritrea lay “preservation of Ethiopia’s territorial integrity” at any cost and Castro said nothing more than repeating verbatim Mengistu’s chauvinistic slogan: “Ethiopia First.” When Castro reiterated the slogans of Mengistu stating ‘We oppose everything aimed at breaking up Ethiopia … we support Ethiopian unity and …territorial integrity,’ he was rubberstamping Mengistu’s scorched earth policy premised on carnage and destruction.

Whether or not Cuba contributed actual ground troops in the devastating counter-offensive against Eritrea in 1978 therefore changed little from the Eritreans’ perspectives. Be it through strategic support, the deployment of troops in the Ogaden, or simply through the provision of non-military aid, Cuba was aware that its resources were supporting the destruction of a liberation movement that only years before it had armed and encouraged. In sum, Author X argued, ‘Not only does this show Cuba aided and abetted Mengistu’s violent war against the Eritrean people, but also that what Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, the Cuban Vice-president, said about the reason why Cuba refused to deploy its troops in Eritrea was both hypocritical and nonsensical. Had Cuba viewed the Eritrean question as ‘a justified national cause of the Eritrean people which could not be solved militarily,’ why did it promise and effectively provide Mengistu ‘every kind of aid’ to enable him to defeat the Eritrean liberation struggle?’ For Author X, therefore, while Castro may have stopped short of calling for the annihilation of ‘Eritrean insurgents’ himself, ‘he was willing to enable Mengistu and his regime to annihilate the Eritrean liberation movement.’

In writing about Cuba’s perceived ‘duplicity’, and acknowledging why Castro may have had his own ideological reasons for encouraging the Eritrean Liberation movements to lay down their arms for the Ethiopian revolution (and Soviet strategic interests), Author X also importantly hinted at the resultant wounded sense of pride among the liberation fighters. As he later reflected in discussions on this historiographical addendum, it was “embarrassing” for him and his comrades to have branded their movements as revolutionary, anti-imperialist and secessionist only to then have Cuba reject that identity. In the original manuscript, Author X emphasised that the Cubans took sides and that this was decisively not in favour of the Eritreans: ‘He [Castro] emphasized that this [the Eritrean case] now was clearly a domestic Ethiopian matter and that we would have the OAU, the African states, international laws and conventions, as well as the UN on our side’ [read against us].’ The ‘us’ against which Cuba rallied are the fighters and revolutionaries with which Author X identified. These fighters were
making enormous sacrifices not only for the independence of their country, but also to create a future independent country governed by socialist principles and that sat within a supportive network of likeminded states. Being rejected by the lynchpin of that system was thus a bitter personal and political pill to swallow, even if it did not affect their long-term commitment to socialist goals or their determination to achieve Eritrean independence.

Author X writes regretfully of Castro’s fundamental dismissal of their political and ideological raison d’être: ‘what he [Castro] did not consider was the fundamental right of the Eritrean people for self-determination. Something which they hoped would provide an opportunity for the flourishment of peace and tranquillity where they would be able to fend for themselves without any fear of persecution or extinction’. In his speech at the Mass Rally in Havana, Mengistu in fact threateningly declared; ‘The position of the Ethiopian masses is clear. The masses of the region of Eritrea, together with their brothers and sisters, will eliminate these secessionist groups...’. 78 To this, Author X defended: ‘In view of the fact that the idea of independence had been deeply rooted in the psyche of the Eritrean people for a long time and this was even acknowledged by Mengistu’s allies...it was fanciful of Castro and Mengistu to imagine that the Eritrean people would join the forces that intended to annihilate the insurgents who were ready and willing to lay down their lives in pursuit of the Eritrean people’s vision.’ The contents of this original manuscript and how it was written by Author X therefore provide evidence of how strong that sense of abandonment and anger can still be and, through this, another case study for understanding the narrative and sense of historical betrayal that remains so central to the Eritrean government’s current ruling psyche. 79 This narrative, which the PFDJ frequently invokes and instrumentalises to defend its sense of distrust, grievance, and exceptionalism, continues to create often insurmountable barriers to actors wishing to engage with the Eritrean regime and renders any political relationships that have been forged with them perpetually fragile, subject to constant historical re-evaluation. Castro’s failure to recognise their struggle and see their aspirations as legitimate has thus, as Author X wrote, ‘left an indelible mark in our memories’ that continues, alongside countless other switching alliances, to cast their long, seemingly inescapable shadows over how diplomacy and alliances are forged in the region.

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3 For examples see Leogrande, Cuba’s Policy in Africa; Gleijeses, International History of the Cold War in Southern Africa; Payne, Opportunities and Dangers, 37-38; Dominguez, To Make a World Safe, 160; Papp, The Soviet Union and Cuba in Ethiopia; Legum and Lee, The Horn of Africa in Continuing Crisis; Yordanov, The Soviet Union and the Horn of Africa.
4 Valdes, Cuba’s Involvement in the Horn of Africa, 64.
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7 Williams, Cuba: Havana’s Military Machine.
8 Speech by Prime Minister Fidel Castro at the closing session of the Ministerial Meeting of the Non-Aligned countries coordinating bureau held at the Atlantic Hotel of Santa Maria del Mar, Havana Province (1975). Available at: http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1975/19750320-1.html
9 Ibid.
10 Castro had unsuccessfully travelled to the Horn of Africa, some claim at the behest of the Soviet Union, in March 1977 to try to avert military confrontation between Mengistu Haile Mariam and Siad Barre.
12 Ibid.
13 Tiruneh states that after this point, it was also ‘widely rumoured that Mengistu’s palace was guarded by Cuban troops after that. More likely than not, the Cubans were in charge of training members of what used to be the Derg’s security force and what, after Mengistu’s emergence as an autocrat, became the Central Command resembling a Pretorian Guard’ (Tiruneh, The Ethiopian revolution 1975-1987, 332).
15 Luckham and Bekele, Foreign Powers and Militarism; Weis, The Soviet Involvement in the Ogaden War
16 Quoted in Mitchell, Jimmy Carter in Africa, 134.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
26 Valenta, Soviet-Cuban Intervention in the Horn of Africa, 361.
28 Foreign Relations, 1977–1980, Volume XVII, Horn of Africa, Part 1 84. Interagency Intelligence Memorandum, Washington, May 22, 1978; It was not only African and Arab states that brought pressure to bear on Cuba and the Soviet Union, but political parties in Europe also objected to the Derg’s decision to impose a military solution disregarding the national aspirations of the Eritrean people. Officials of both the French and Italian Communist parties expressed their objection in their respective party newspapers L’Humanité and L’Unità. (Keeling's Record of World Events (formerly Keeling's Contemporary Archives), Volume 26, January,
73, d. 1637, ll. 141


Ibid.


Dominquez, Limitations and Consequences, 700-701.

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A meticulously documented secret CIA report based on sources that were available in December 1981 (and released in February 2007) shows Cuba’s severe petroleum dependence on heavily subsidized deliveries from the Soviet Union. It states, among other things: ‘Soviet supplied petroleum provides more than 75 per cent of the island’s total energy consumption. Cuba has no large oil deposits and little hope of finding any; domestic petroleum amounts less than 5 per cent of total petroleum requirements.’ (CIA, Cuba: Implications of Dependence on Soviet Oil. A Research Paper, Information available as of 1 Dec. 1981; Released Feb. 2007.)

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Payne, Opportunities and Dangers, 37.


Castro also dismissed the Eritrean cause by considering the conflict one of internal disagreement, rather than a conflict between two sovereign states with Ethiopia as the occupying force after its illegal annexation of Eritrea. The US Federal Research Division states that even though there is disagreement between two sovereign states with Ethiopia as the occupying force after its illegal annexation of Eritrea.

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The Status of Cuban Military Forces in Ethiopia, Interagency Intelligence Memorandum, 2 September 1981.

A further factor that potentially deterred Cuba from deploying its troops in Eritrea was fear of heavy casualties. As the US Interagency Intelligence Memorandum points out: ‘Castro has long been alert to the negative domestic reaction that is sure to be generated by heavy Cuban casualties on African battlefields. A recent report indicates that as casualties have mounted in Angola, Castro has become disenchanted with the continuing military burden there and would prefer to avoid becoming entrapped in a similar protracted conflict elsewhere. Moreover, the Cubans have a healthy respect for the ability of the Eritreans to sustain a guerrilla war. The level of casualties Cuba sustained in the Ogaden—reportedly higher than first indications—has probably also given Castro pause about further Ethiopian combat.’ (Foreign Relations, 1977–1980, Volume XVII, Horn of Africa, Part 1, 84. Interagency Intelligence Memorandum, Washington, May 22, 1978)

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Ibid. (emphasis added).


Fontaine, Terrorism: The Cuban Connection, 560.


Address at the Sixth Summit of Nonaligned Countries, Havana, 3 September 1978, Granma Weekly Review, 9 September 1979.

Kifleyesus, Recollections of Return; Mengisteab and Yohannes, “What has gone wrong”, 45-71.

Connell, Historical Dictionary of Eritrea; Giorgis, Eritrea at a crossroads; Bereketeab, Emerging from the Doldrums, 295-313.

See Fidel Castro, The Non-aligned countries will know how to fulfill the duty that the present demands of them, Speech delivered at the closing session of the III Ministerial meeting of the Co-coordinating Bureau of the Nonaligned Countries, Havana, 19 March 1975 (Editorial de ciencias sociales, La Habana, 1975), pp. 13-14

The same treatment is reserved for other actors who failed to live up to their promises to the Eritreans. Author X writes the following about the Sudanese government’s involvement in the counter-offensive launched against the Eritreans in late 1981: ‘The offensive involved over 120,000 soldiers and was launched on seven different fronts, including Tigray and the Sudan border. The decision of the Sudanese government, in spite of its false friendly rhetoric, to allow Ethiopian tanks into its territory in order to facilitate the planned deadly assault on the EPLF from the rear was mindboggling. It was often wrongly assumed that the Sudanese government was one of the major benefactors of the Eritrean liberation struggle. Such a level of betrayal at the most critical moment of the struggle’s history demonstrates the falsehood of such an assumption. Historically, not only did consecutive Ethiopian and Sudanese governments fail to say anything about the heinous crimes that they committed in Eritrea and southern Sudan respectively, but also, they left no stone unturned in exploiting the rebellions and the refugees in each other’s territories as bargaining chips in pursuit of self-interest (see Kibreab, Eritrea: A Dream Deferred). The betrayal the Sudanese government exhibited during the Red Star Campaign was therefore a continuation of this opportunistic foreign policy.’

Mengistu’s speech at the Mass Rally in Revolutionary Square, Havana, April 26, 1978

Reid, Caught in the headlights of history.