

Forum: Historical United Nations Security Council

Issue: The South African Border War 1966

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Introduction

The South African Border War (also known as the Namibian War of Independence), which began in the year 1966, is a complex conflict occurring mainly between South West Africa (present-day Namibia), Angola and South Africa. Despite this, the South African Border War reflects the tensions of the Cold War as well, showing how the United States and the Soviet Union may fight through other countries by influencing or becoming involved in localized struggles.

At its core, the conflict was caused by South Africa's continued occupation and administration of South West Africa), which is a former German colony that was transferred to South African control as a League of Nations mandate after World War I. Even after the United Nations was founded and such mandates were to be transitioned into trust territories, South Africa refused to lose its control over South West Africa and place it under UN Trusteeship. Instead, South Africa practically turned South West Africa into a fifth province, applying South Africa's own apartheid laws on its population, with a policy of racial segregation on the basis of white supremacy.

The early stages of armed resistance have already had destabilizing effects on Southern Africa, especially when it comes to issues like displacement, militarization, and political instability. Even though the full scope of the conflict is yet unknown, it is likely that Southern Africa will continue to feel the potential impacts of the conflict caused by South Africa's use of force in the region, affecting civilian life and security.

Definition of Key Terms



South West Africa

The former name of present-day Namibia. After World War I, it was transferred to South African administration as a League of Nations mandate, before which it was a German colony. South Africa has refused its transition into a UN Trust Territory.

Apartheid

Apartheid is a policy of segregation and political, social, and economic discrimination against the non-white majority enforced by the South African government. The extreme racial segregation of apartheid officially started in 1948 and includes such restrictions as where people of certain races can live or own land, what jobs they can hold, and who can and cannot participate in government.

SADF (South African Defence Force)

SADF is the military branch of apartheid South Africa. It has been deployed to maintain control over South West Africa, suppressing nationalist resistance.

SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organization)

SWAPO, which was founded in 1960, is the primary nationalist movement fighting against South Africa's rule in South West Africa, championing Namibian independence instead. It created its armed wing in 1962, called the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), which began guerrilla operations against South African forces in 1966.

Guerrilla warfare

Guerrilla warfare is defined as irregular operations characterized by small, mobile forces conducting surprise attacks with the aim of harassing, delaying, and disrupting the enemy's military operations. PLAN has employed this strategy since the Omugulugwombashe battle in 1966.

Mandate system



A system established by the League of Nations to entrust former colonies of defeated powers to advanced nations until they were ready for independence. South Africa was entrusted with South West Africa under this system.

Trusteeship system

International Trustee System is a system by the UN after the World War II intending to help territories transition to self-government or independence. South Africa has refused to place South West Africa under this system.

Decolonization

Decolonization is the undoing of colonialism, which is the process of imperial nations establishing and dominating foreign territories, often overseas, especially after World War II. Decolonization is considered a global priority by the United Nations.

Background Information

Origins of South African rule over South West Africa

South West Africa was a German colony prior to the outbreak of World War I. The area was taken by South African forces in 1915 as part of the Allied war effort. Following the war, the League of Nations granted South Africa a Class C mandate over the area, which provided for administrative control of the territory but required that South Africa ensure the well-being and development of the indigenous population.

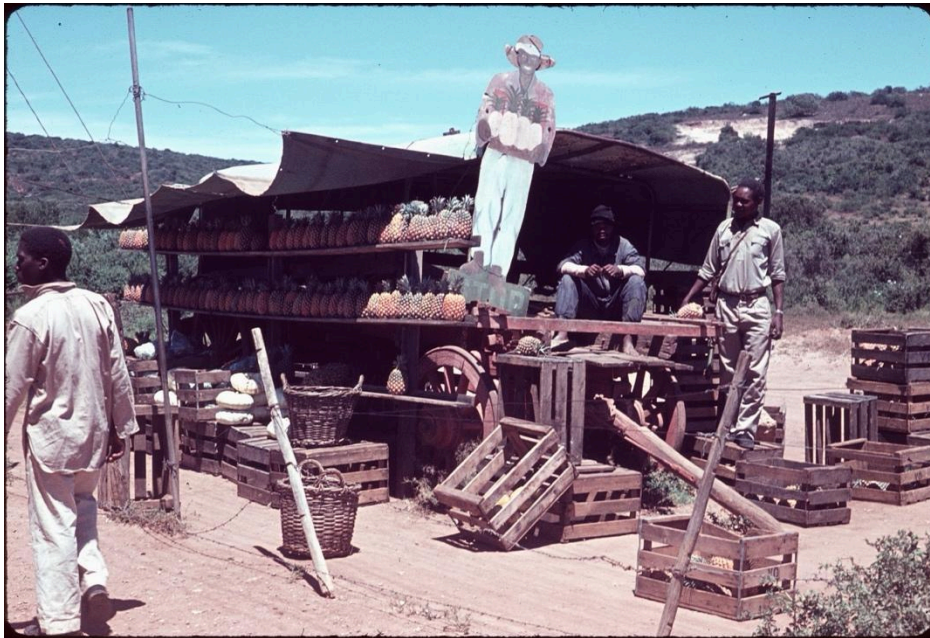
Instead, South Africa has been managing the land more as a colony than a trust, incrementally incorporating it into its political and juridical structure. This involves the application of racial segregation legislation, laying the groundwork for outright apartheid governance in the following years. In contrast to other mandates that progressed toward independence or were turned into UN Trust Territories



following World War II, South Africa has not relinquished control or collaborated with the United Nations. It is clear by the mid of the 20th century that South Africa is consolidating permanent control and not planning on letting its control over South West Africa go, therefore contradicting the spirit of the mandate system and the decolonization principles of the United Nations.

Rise of apartheid and its extension to Namibia

It was in the year 1948 that the National Party took control in South Africa and formally made apartheid the dominant ruling ideology. These legislative acts have imposed rigid racial segregation, depriving the majority Black population of basic civil rights, restricting their mobility, and regulating land ownership based on race. For example, Black people are not allowed to run businesses or professional practices in areas that are designated as "white South Africa" unless they possess a permit to do so, which are granted only exceptionally. South Africa has extended these policies to South West Africa despite the growing criticism coming from the international community.



The indigenous ethnic groups that make up the local population in South West Africa are subjected to systematic discrimination, displacement, and



disenfranchisement. Apartheid implementation in the territory has further accelerated resistance movements and drawn the attention of decolonization activists all around the world.

Emergence of nationalist resistance

South West African activists have turned to more organized and radical forms of resistance as peaceful petitions and diplomatic appeals continue to fail bringing a change to the current situation. In 1960, the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) was founded under the leadership of Sam Nujoma. Its goal is to achieve full independence of South West Africa and put an end to South Africa's forceful occupation of the region.



Figure 2: Sam Nujoma, founder and leader of SWAPO

SWAPO's founding represents a turning point in the anti-colonial struggle. SWAPO gained recognition as the legitimate representative of the Namibian people and began establishing ties with African liberation movements, the Non-Aligned Movement, and sympathetic countries. SWAPO's own armed wing called the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), was formed by 1962 and began preparing for guerrilla warfare. Many PLAN fighters were trained abroad in countries like Algeria, Ghana, and Egypt, and began infiltrating the northern regions of South West Africa from bases in the neighboring country Angola.

The international response and legal struggle

The situation in South West Africa has become a symbol of the broader decolonization struggle in Africa. South West Africa remained under a colonial



regime refusing to acknowledge its international obligations (South Africa), while many other African nations gained independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Under pressure from its African and Asian member states, the United Nations General Assembly has condemned South Africa's continued forceful occupation on South West Africa and the apartheid rule it has brought. However, enforcement remains unclear due to opposition from key Western powers in the Security Council.

Ethiopia and Liberia, two independent African states and original members of the League of Nations, brought a case before the International Court of Justice in 1960, arguing that South Africa is violating the terms of the mandate and international human rights norms. The case dragged on for six years and was ultimately dismissed in 1966 for procedural reasons. Even though the Court did not issue a ruling on the substance of the case, the process has made the situation draw international legal attention and demonstrated the increasing use of international law as a tool against colonialism.

Outbreak of armed conflict in 1966

The tensions that have been building for a long time erupted into open conflict on 26 August 1966. South African forces (called the SADF) carried out a helicopter-borne assault on a small guerrilla training camp operated by PLAN at Omuglugwombashe (also called Ongulumbashe) in northern South West Africa. This battle, even though its scale is limited, marks the official beginning of the South African Border War.



Figure 3: Map showing Ongulumbashe, South West Africa

The conflict shifted from political confrontation to military struggle from that point onward. In response, South Africa has reinforced its military presence,



tightening control over northern Namibia. PLAN, in turn, adopted classic guerrilla tactics (ambushes, sabotage, cross-border raids e.g.) relying on support from Angolan territory, using the country as refuge. The war, which is still in the early stages as of the end of 1966, threatens to destabilize the entire region and make Southern Africa a locale of Cold War competition through other countries.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

South Africa



South Africa stands right in the center of the South African Border War, as it is both the main occupying power in South West Africa against the UN Trusteeship System and the enforcer of apartheid politics and ideology in the region, essentially promoting racism. When World War I was concluded,

South Africa was granted a League of Nations mandate to administer South West Africa, which was previously a German colony. However South Africa started treating the territory not as a mandate but as a de facto fifth province, gradually integrating its own system of laws and policies into the country, and refusing to give away the power it holds over South West Africa even though it goes against the UN Trusteeship System. This includes the full application of apartheid laws, enforcing strict racial segregation and the systematic oppression of the indigenous African population by the white government. South Africa's military, the South African Defence Force (SADF), has played a leading role in suppressing anti-colonial uprisings, particularly by targeting South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) and its armed wing, the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN). Following the guerrilla warfare outbreak in 1966, South Africa has begun employing extensive counter-insurgency operations against SWAPO and PLAN.

South West Africa (Namibia)





South West Africa is a territory under South African administration since 1915. While not a sovereign country as of 1966, it is one of the main battlegrounds of the conflict. Indigenous resistance movements, most notably of which SWAPO, have mobilized against South Africa's forceful occupation of the region and the apartheid policies it enforces. The 1966 armed resistance, particularly the Omugulugwombashe battle, marks the formal beginning of the conflict.

Angola (Portuguese Angola)



guerrillas.

Portuguese Angola is a colony of the Portuguese Empire in southwestern Africa as of 1966, and is geographically and strategically significant to this issue. South West Africa shares a border with Angola (to the north), which has resulted with the latter serving as a refuge and training ground for SWAPO

United Kingdom (UK)



The United Kingdom has complex ties to the region as the former colonial authority of South Africa. Although the UK is no longer directly involved in the administration of South Africa, it continues to maintain strong economic and political relations like trade and investment with the apartheid government. At the United Nations (UN), the UK has often walked a fine line, balancing its condemnation of apartheid with broader Cold War alliances and concerns over decolonization outcomes. It has not recognized South Africa's continued control over South West Africa as legitimate, but neither does it support mandatory sanctions or interventions at this stage.



United States of America (USA)



As of 1966, the United States of America has not taken an active military or political role in the South African Border War, but its influence looms large due to the global context of the Cold War. Officially, the U.S. supports decolonization and has accordingly called for South Africa to stop its forceful occupation of the region and the UN Trusteeship system in South West Africa to be implemented. However, it also maintains a policy of strategic caution toward South Africa, as the U.S. views South Africa as a key ally in the fight against communism globally. This duality means that, while the U.S. criticizes apartheid and South African defiance of UN mandates, it has not pushed for strong punitive measures or direct involvement.

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)



The USSR is another major international player indirectly involved in the conflict. The USSR has condemned South Africa's forceful occupation of South West Africa as part of its general anti-imperialist and anti-colonial foreign policy, supporting liberation movements across the continent of Africa. The USSR has expressed rhetorical and material support for movements like SWAPO fighting against South African forces, even though there is no direct Soviet involvement in the South African Border War. The USSR has essentially positioned itself as a supporter of African self-determination against Western-aligned colonial powers.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
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1915	South African forces, under the British Empire's directive, invade and take control of German South West Africa during World War I.
1920	South West Africa becomes a League of Nations mandate under South African administration.
1946	South Africa refuses to place South West Africa under UN trusteeship despite the requests of the newly formed United Nations.
1960	SWAPO is established and begins organizing political resistance.
1960	Ethiopia and Liberia bring a legal case against South Africa to the International Court of Justice.
1962	SWAPO forms its armed wing, the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN).
1966	Armed conflict officially begins with the Battle of Omugulugwombashe.

Relevant UN Resolutions and Other Documents

- [UN General Assembly Resolution 2145 \(XXI\) – Termination of the Mandate over South West Africa](#), Adopted: 27 October 1966. This resolution by the UN General Assembly officially revokes South Africa's mandate over South West Africa.
- [UN Charter – Chapter XII: International Trusteeship System](#) Entered into force: 24 October 1945. Chapter XII of the United Nations Charter outlines the International Trusteeship System, designed to guide non-self-governing



territories toward independence or self-government under international supervision. South West Africa was expected to be placed under this system after the League of Nations mandate ended, but South Africa refused.

- [UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 \(XV\) – Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples](#) Adopted: 14 December 1960. This essential document establishes the UN's firm stance against colonialism, promoting that all peoples have the right to self-determination and calling for an end to foreign domination.
- [International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion \(1950\) – Legal Status of South West Africa](#) Issued: 11 July 1950. The ICJ affirmed that South Africa still bore international legal obligations under the original mandate, despite the dissolution of the League of Nations.
- [South West Africa Cases \(Ethiopia and Liberia v. South Africa\)](#) Judgment delivered: 18 July 1966. This case, brought by two African nations, challenged South Africa's governance of South West Africa as a violation of international law and human rights.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

UN petitions and monitoring (1950s-1960s)

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the United Nations General Assembly repeatedly requested South Africa to submit reports on its administration of South West Africa, as required by the original mandate. South Africa consistently refused, prompting the UN to establish committees to monitor the situation from abroad. These efforts helped keep international attention on the issue, but had limited practical effect due to South Africa's not cooperating.

Formation of UN committees on South West Africa

In 1953, the United Nations established a committee that was tasked with receiving petitions from the South West Africa people and examining the situation in



the country. This was complemented by the establishment of the Special Committee on South West Africa in 1961, whose purpose was to suggest stronger action against South Africa. However, both efforts were hindered by South Africa's refusal to grant access to UN observers.

Ethiopia and Liberia's legal challenge against South Africa (1960-1966)

Ethiopia and Liberia brought a case against South Africa to the International Court of Justice, accusing it of violating its obligations under the mandate system. Although the ICJ dismissed the case in 1966 on procedural grounds, the attempt itself was a landmark moment that brought legal attention to the issue and underscored the commitment of African nations to using international law against colonialism.

Possible Solutions

Imposing diplomatic or economic pressure

While military intervention is unlikely to happen, the Security Council or General Assembly could recommend targeted sanctions, trade restrictions, or arms embargoes on South Africa to encourage its compliance to international mandates. Delegates could also suggest withdrawing the diplomatic recognition of South Africa's claim over the territory.

Support regional mediation efforts

Delegates may call on African nations or the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to lead or host negotiations between SWAPO representatives and South African officials in hopes of a ceasefire. Encouraging diplomacy may avoid the deaths of many people during battle.

Developing humanitarian assistance channels

Delegates could propose the creation of a UN refugee or aid mechanism to support civilians displaced by the conflict in northern South West Africa or Angola.



Humanitarian measures can avoid military escalation while addressing the human cost of the war.

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