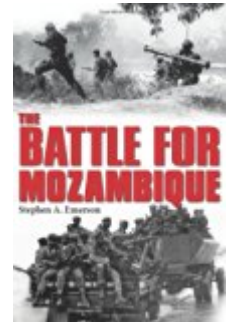


Stephen A. Emerson. *The Battle for Mozambique: The Frelimo-Renamo Struggle (1977-1992)*. West Midlands: Helion and Company Limited, 2014. 288 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-909384-92-7.



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Published on H-Luso-Africa (January, 2015)

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The British historian Malyn Newitt wrote the following about *The Battle for Mozambique*: “Steve Emerson has written the most comprehensive account of the civil war in Mozambique that has yet been attempted,” and he underlines his statement by explaining that “Emerson’s account is largely a military history” (p. 1). If one accepts that a war’s history may merely be the story of a battle, Newitt’s observation is correct and can be reinforced when he stresses that one of the qualities of the book is the extensive use of interviews with former participants, as well as the sheer number of facts, some of them “told” for the first time.

This book was published at the beginning of 2014, although it was probably written a year before, if not earlier. At the end of chapter 1, Stephen A. Emerson writes that after 1992, “the competition between Frelimo [Frente de Libertação e Moçambique, Mozambican Liberation Front] and Renamo [Resistência Nacional de Moçambique, Mozambican National Resistance] would continue, albeit in the political arena now.

And the guns would remain silent” (p. 34). It appears that he does not address the 2013-14 crisis. Of course, a fully developed “new” civil war did not materialize in Mozambique during these two years, but local violent skirmishes probably led to several hundred deaths. Renamo was, surprisingly, able to swiftly recover an armed wing, which could not be, twenty-one years later, the mere mobilization of some veteran guerrilla soldiers equipped with rusty Kalashnikovs. Indeed, currently some Renamo fighters appear to be young men. On October 15, 2014, political competition between Frelimo and Renamo—and the Movimento Democrático de Moçambique (MDM), the new opposition party created in 2009—took place again for the occasion of the presidential, legislative, and provincial elections, the first in which the ruling party no longer fielded a leader active in the anticolonial struggle as its presidential candidate. Frelimo officially won, but whatever the final outcome, including the possibility of renewed political instability, it is most certainly the begin-

ning of a new historical period for Mozambique, the “post-post-colonial” period.

Following the recent 2013-14 crisis between Frelimo and Renamo, it is useful to “dive” back into the day-to-day events of the 1977-92 war, although its overall social, cultural, psychological, etc., history has yet to be written. Emerson works at the U.S. National Defense University and as a consultant for government policy makers—a common combination in the United States that is largely rejected by European academics in their claim for independence. Obviously, the author had privileged access to classified sources from these years, but he is not alone in this respect, as João M. Cabrita had the same access for his *Mozambique: The Tortuous Road to Democracy* published in 2001 and Emerson’s book is probably a partial rewriting of several “situation reports” that he wrote for a number of governmental American bodies.

The book consists of eight chapters, chronologically organized. In “Prelude to War” (chapter 1), Emerson classifies the war in Mozambique as forming part of the Cold War between Washington and Moscow, without considering these countries as the source of the conflict. The “Birth of an Insurgency” (chapter 2) makes the link between the liberation struggle in Rhodesia and the beginning of guerrilla warfare in Mozambique. This “Rhodesian period” of the war inside Mozambique came to an end in 1979 as “the turning point that never was” (p. 50). On the contrary, Zimbabwean independence triggered the move of Renamo to the Gorongosa Mountains, as discussed in “Battleground Central Mozambique” (chapter 3), which led to a deepening of tensions with Renamo supported by apartheid South Africa (chapter 4). The war escalated between 1981 and 1983, in particular with the rebels’ crossing of Zambezi River. Renamo was highly dependent on South African politics—“The South African Factor” (chapter 5). But the Nkomati Agreement (1984) obliged Pretoria to covert

rather than manifest support. Renamo’s continued growth is dealt with in chapter 6, “Zimbabwe to the Rescue.” In spite of the new political course in the Soviet Union and the beginning of the end of apartheid after the South African defeat in Kuito-Kuanavale in Angola (1988), the tensions nevertheless persisted, as shown in “The Slugfest Continues” (chapter 7), with some indirect negotiations. The turn of the 1990s, when Frelimo found itself increasingly confined to major cities with Renamo maintaining a tenuous hold on an increasingly sparse countryside, is discussed in chapter 8, “The Hardest Battle of All.” During this period, desperate forms of peasant resistance—such as the “Naparama phenomenon”[1]—developed as did direct talks in Rome. There is no conclusion to the book, except for a very short segment, “War’s Postscript.”

From the very beginning of the book, we understand that the author is cautious in not favoring one or the other side of the war—exactly as the U.S. government did in Mozambique but not in Angola. The fact that the sources on Renamo are more extensively used than the ones concerning Frelimo does not suggest any preference for Renamo; it is part of the book’s quality, since the Renamo side has always been more poorly documented. Nevertheless, the thesis Emerson defends—that this “battle” changed in character as it continued and was a true civil war from the beginning of the 1980s—will not please Frelimo supporters or for that matter Western academics sympathetic to Frelimo. Still, Emerson only “argues” this point but does not cautiously analyze or support it using quotations from books or articles that already defended the same thesis over the years (except for Newitt’s work).

This is, indeed, a military history book, which lists and follows “operation” after “operation” from both Frelimo/Zimbabwean/Tanzanian and Renamo/Rhodesian/South African sides. Consequently there is little interest in summarizing the events here. Emerson clearly defines periodiza-

tion: the “Rhodesian period” (up to 1980) during which the Rhodesian Front Government never imagined any kind of political consistency (let alone autonomy) for Renamo; the “South-African period” (1980-88) when the apartheid regime openly supported Renamo up until the end of 1984 but simultaneously found that it was in its own interest for Renamo to achieve greater political consistency, and continuing its support in a concealed fashion after 1984; and the final years (1988-92), doubtlessly the worst years during which Renamo, then unable to rely on any external state support whatsoever, was still able to continue the war in some “liberated areas.” Despite its apparent clarity, this periodization seems too “external.” From my perspective, the turning point lies at the time when Renamo was able to cross the Zambezi River (1982) and established large “liberated areas” in Zambezia and the Tete Province. This evolution forced Renamo to pay more attention to peasant societies and build a civilian apparatus that was to be of greatest importance in 1992-94 when Renamo successfully became a civilian political party.

The book is filled with details about facts and events. Emerson criticizes some authors, in particular those sympathetic to Frelimo, for having “story-told” facts without sufficient verification. As a historian, I am particularly grateful to him for his focus on the *Flechas* and *Grupos Especiais* (colonial special troops) often presented as the infamous origin of Renamo to challenge the new independent, Frelimo-ruled country. I have expressed, throughout my work in French and Portuguese, the lack of accuracy of this statement, and it is rewarding to read it again in a properly argued text in English. Yet, while criticizing some authors, Emerson could have extended his criticism to the so-called *GerSONY Report (Report of Mozambican Refugee Accounts of Principally Conflict-Related Experience in Mozambique)*, authored by Robert GerSONY and issued by the U.S. State Department in 1988, which “theorized” about the war as “destruction areas” as a result of Renamo-led inter-

vention, using research based only on interviews of Mozambican refugees from Zambezia in Malawi and controlled by international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (seen as modern governmental bodies by people thus giving the “right answers”[2]). This report was based on double translation—from English to Portuguese and from Portuguese to African languages—of interviews of refugees who supposedly had witnessed Renamo’s systematic atrocities. Yet, none of these refugees had seen a single Zimbabwean/Tanzanian soldier or plane or helicopter. GerSONY failed to notice that the great wave of refugees from Zambezia to Malawi did not occur after the Renamo offensive of 1986 but after Frelimo’s counter-offensive in 1987. He applied a mathematical method to evaluate the number of casualties, i.e., the quotas method, without realizing that many refugees from the same area reported the same incident; indeed, GerSONY’s evaluation found one hundred thousand war-related casualties, which is mathematically improbable. But paradoxically, in April 1988, the number was probably far higher; in fact, the number of casualties resulting from the civil war is unknown, even though the current version stands at one million deaths in military confrontations and by war-related starvation at the time of the Peace Agreement in October 1992! Actually, the *GerSONY Report* did not substantiate its allegations and informed very few. Therefore, why did Emerson fail to criticize GerSONY? Is it related to the fact that he was a U.S. State Department funded consultant? Emerson also accepts Jeremy Weinstein’s affirmation that Renamo was responsible for “the vast majority of the incidents of violence” (p. 165) even though Weinstein’s book, *Inside the Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (2007), is not principally based on field research in its “statistical comparison” of violence between Uganda, Mozambique, and Peru but rather based on secondary sources. My own field research shows that the responsibility for violence against civilians was shared by both sides. But the *production of data* was unfortunately not

well-shared: violence by Renamo against people loyal to Frelimo in the South near the capital city was far better documented by the Frelimo state and thus by international news agencies than the violence in the distant Zambebian hinterland against Renamo's "liberated areas."

Nevertheless, one must be grateful to the author for his critical attitude toward the "facts." Unfortunately, however, he does not introduce a new perspective or new analysis of the war—except for the view that negotiations could have begun and succeeded far sooner, since Frelimo was no longer communist and the war was thus lacking in good reasons. In other words, although it was not the principal aim of the book, Emerson's social and political analysis of what Frelimo was is weak; a summary of data culled from other studies would have been useful, at least as useful as the "Historical Context" section in chapter 1. This section unnecessarily begins with the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama, and repeats such myths as "Lisbon's idealist vision of assimilating millions of Mozambicans" when the function of the assimilation legislation was to define who was *not* an assimilated person, i.e., 99,9 percent of the African population which should be compelled to forced labor. It continues without quoting any historical sources with the "democratic vision" of Eduardo Mondlane, the president of the Mozambican Liberation Front in the 1960s, probably an "automatic qualification" because he is described as a "distinguished US-educated academic" (does Emerson mean as opposed to the not-so-distinguished leaders of the radical Frelimo movement educated in Portugal or Eastern Europe?). But the historical fact is that Mondlane never said or wrote a single word against the one-party state, but for Emerson it seems that since he was not a "communist," he was therefore a democrat (p. 21).

The author rightly notes that one of the reasons for some sections of the peasantry to be supportive of Renamo was the authoritarian modern-

ization of Frelimo's politics. However, he expresses this statement in a single line: the social foundation of the war is barely present on the basis of the assumption that it was a Cold War proxy conflict rather than a regional conflict with apartheid as a mere aspect of the Cold War. Nonetheless, Emerson does not defend the "externalist" thesis regarding the war only as an "aggression war." He reiterates throughout the book—similar to other authors who he does not quote—on the one hand that Renamo would never have been able to become what it became without Rhodesian and South African support; but on the other hand he also maintains that without the profound discontent provoked by Frelimo's policies, it would not have been able to transform itself into the important rebel movement it became from the 1980s onwards.

Emerson could have shared more insight into Frelimo's social change given the link between social and military history. Did Frelimo accept the negotiations with Renamo only because the world was changing at the end of the 1980s? Or was it because Frelimo was no longer the state-apparatus party it had once been and had turned into the natural party of the most modern sectors of Mozambican capitalism, which opened it up to imagining other ways of maintaining its domination? Emerson could also have expanded his discussion of the communal villages as one of Frelimo's military tactics from the 1980s onwards; on the recruitment of troops (he gives some figures on child-soldiers on both sides, but since he conducted interviews with ex-combatants, he should have systematically spoken with them about the conditions of their recruitment, including psychological aspects); on Renamo's military bases (we learn about them while reading about armed conflict but it would have been useful for Emerson to carry out a study on their changing typology and above all their local relations with the civilian population across the country); and on relations with traditional chiefs and the pro-Renamo civil-

ian militia, the Mujeeba, which was very important for the defense system of the aforesaid bases.

There is another point of importance that the author could have addressed. Inside the Frelimo party, its Central Committee, and its politburo, was Renamo ever considered as a group of “armed bandits,” that is, as a *non-political* body? The book gives the overwhelming impression that this was the case within the party. But perhaps it was not as simple: how should one interpret that the defense minister, General Hama Thai—by chance a Cindau, just like Afonso Dhlakama, the president of Renamo—gave special authorization in 1987 to the French anthropologist Christian Geffray to undertake field research in the Nampula Province, a war zone, to study the social basis of Renamo? Since Emerson interviewed José Luíz Cabaço, at the time secretary of Frelimo’s Central Committee, who helped Geffray in obtaining this authorization, it is a pity not to have established an association—probably an indirect one—between the “small” beginnings of a new vision of the war in a few narrow sectors of Frelimo and the start of indirect negotiations.

These limits are probably linked to another problem: in the “Selected Bibliography”—although “selected,” it actually quotes all of the books referenced in the text, but unfortunately does not reference the unpublished or secret reports often cited only in footnotes—which includes sixty references, there are but two references in Portuguese and not a single one in French. Obviously, this is not only a language problem but also an issue with balancing references and sources. If Emerson had paid attention to French studies, he would have found relevant elements which he included in his book that were already pointed out years ago in other studies, such as Geffray’s articles in the *Politique Africaine* journal and his famous *La cause des armes au Mozambique* (1990); my special dossier of *Politique Africaine* and 2002 book on Renamo; Christine Messiant and Roland Marchal’s study on de-

mobilization and demilitarization (1992); and others.[3] If he had paid attention to Portuguese-language studies, he would have used books by the anti-Communist Brazilian soldier Pedro Marangoni, especially his *A opção pela espada: Um brasileiro na linha de frente, em defesa do Ocidente* (2004), about the very beginning of Renamo. He would also have examined the studies of local contexts of the war (including the Naparama phenomenon) by young Mozambican researchers—only one is quoted—some of which were later published in the ProMedia series in Maputo. When he mentions the Paulo Oliveira case, he bases his argumentation solely on Frelimo supporter William Minter’s 1989 report in English, *The Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO)* as described by ex-participants, telling the story of a Renamo “defector.” But Oliveira admitted in his 2006 book published in Portuguese, *Dossier Makwakwa – Renamo: Uma descida ao coração das trevas*, that he staged his own Renamo defection when he returned to Mozambique in 1988 as an infiltrated Frelimo agent. Furthermore, Portugal is almost absent in the study on Renamo, despite the fact that the Portuguese military intelligence service (DINFO) gave support to Renamo, precisely with the idea of building a “Portuguese” link and alleviating the dependency toward South Africa; Dhlakama’s daughter, for example, studied in Portugal.

What’s more, I was astonished not to find some specific references in English, such as David Robinson’s PhD thesis on Renamo, or Carrie Manning’s book.[4] Although he uses some academic sources from both sides, clearly, the author is not sufficiently familiar with key academic studies on the topic. A “third side” is missing, possibly because the author was unaware of its existence, namely, the 1992-94 Onumoz (United Nations Operation in Mozambique) archives deposited in 1995 at the Arquivo Histórico de Moçambique, which include a large number of documents, especially on Renamo at the moment of its demobilization. Indeed, Onumoz had a complete list of

Renamo soldiers with names, places of birth, etc., on a CD-ROM! It was probably the first guerrilla group on such a digital data base. One wonders where this CD-ROM can be found today.

The book lacks context and comparison. The author rightly quotes Charles Van Niekerk (the South African responsible for covert assistance to Renamo) who said that supporting Renamo was very cheap compared to the substantial support requested by the National Union of the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). But, as the author describes, page after page, how South Africa helped Renamo, one might be left with the impression that the apartheid regime's support for Renamo was huge, when it was twenty times less than its support for UNITA! Since Emerson does not study the relations between the civilian population and Renamo military bases, he fails to mention the food supply system of the latter, and it seems as if some isolated islands were fed only by resources sent via South African planes or submarines. But this was more than a mere financial problem: on the one hand, the low-level support given to Renamo illustrated South Africa's political options, even under Pieter Willem Botha's government, not to overrun Frelimo but to oblige it to change; on the other hand, South Africa's aim in Angola was actually to overrun the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) because of the presence of Cuban troops—which can explain their high-level support for UNITA. Whereas the first type of support was therefore in the hands of secret services, the second was controlled by the army. Indeed, this dichotomy closely matches American analysis, which never considered Frelimo as Communist even during the radical phase, while considering the MPLA Communist, up to 1992.

Finally, with regard to interviews of former combatants, Emerson tells us that few interviewees asked for anonymity, which he obviously had to accept. But one could question why he expanded this anonymity to almost all of the inter-

viewees, except for top leaders. From the standpoint of historical methodology, the opposite approach should have been adopted: the identity of almost all interviewees should have been given, and as many details about them as possible should have been provided.

Although I am probably becoming too severe at this point of my review, I must confess that it is rather upsetting that a book about a former Portuguese colony, an independent country having Portuguese as its official language, is almost completely based on English-language sources. Is the English language adequate to understand the whole world? On the very first page of the book, Newitt tells us that this conflict, in spite of its international connections, was a "very African" conflict rooted in the history of Mozambique. Indeed, it is important to understand that. But Emerson's book is "very American," not in the sense of the independent North American academic tradition, but in terms of it being rooted in the tradition of consultancy carried out by academics for mainly governmental security bodies. Mixing academic research and situation report consultancy is always a complicated exercise.

I nonetheless do believe that this book should be read by all "Mozambicanist" researchers and advanced students. Despite its limitations, it provides a lot of facts, often disclosing new ones. Facts are not history, but history needs facts. However one "fact" is erroneous (p. 135): in Cabo Delgado Province, Renamo never enjoyed popular support among the Makonde, but it did among the Macua and Mwene people—Makondes supported Frelimo during the anticolonial war and have remained overwhelmingly faithful to Frelimo. We cannot but agree with the last sentence of the book: "Any peaceful resolution of differences—no matter how imperfect—is always preferable to the cost of violence" (p. 205). But will a peaceful resolution of differences be possible when, in an imperfect country, there has never been sharing of power or wealth? Is history a question of good

intentions? These past days (late October 2014) in post-election Mozambique illustrate that it cannot thrive without justice, peace, and democracy.

Notes

1]. Naparama insurgents were peasant groups ritually inoculated against gun shots and fighting against Renamo in the North of the country, soon recovered by Frelimo's secret services.

[2]. It is very important to fully understand that civil war in Mozambique was, at least partly, a war between two populations: one living in the sphere of the modern state and the other using Renamo guerilla warfare as a way to protect itself against the authoritarian modernization process led by the Frelimo state. The modern state, NGOs, and foreign diplomats, centered on urban areas, were largely perceived as one and the same thing by the latter section of the "population." Their responses should be appreciated in accordance with this context.

[3]. Christian Geffray and Mögens Pedersen, "Nampula en guerre," *Politique Africaine*, 29 (1988): 28-40; Christian Geffray, "Fragments d'un discours du pouvoir (1975-1985): Du bon usage d'une méconnaissance scientifique," *Politique Africaine* 29 (1988): 71-85; Christian Geffray, *La cause des armes au Mozambique: Anthropologie d'une guerre civile* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 1990); Michel Cahen, "Mozambique: Guerre et nationalismes," *Politique Africaine*, 29 (1988): 2-86; Michel Cahen, *Les Bandits: Un historien au Mozambique, 1994* (Paris: Publications du Centre Culturel Calouste Gulbenkian, 2002); and Roland Marchal and Christine Messiant, *Les chemins de la guerre et de la paix: Fins de conflits en Afrique orientale et australe* (Paris: Karthala, 1997).

[4]. David Robinson, "Curse of the Land: A History of the Mozambican Civil War" (PhD diss., University of Western Australia, 2006); and Carrie Manning, *The Politics of Peace in Mozambique: Post-Conflict Democratization, 1992-2000* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002).

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Citation: Michel Cahen. Review of Stephen A. Emerson. *The Battle for Mozambique: The Frelimo-Renamo Struggle (1977-1992)*. H-Luso-Africa, H-Net Reviews. January, 2015.

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