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The Battle for Mozambique: The Frelimo-Renamo Struggle, 1977–1992

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BOOK REVIEW

The Battle for Mozambique: The Frelimo-Renamo Struggle, 1977–1992, edited by Stephen A. Emerson, Pinetown, South Africa: 30° South, 2013, 240 pp.

This is, above all, a book of military history which – like the classic ‘curate’s egg’ – is ‘good in parts’. The book addresses the 16-year war between the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO) government and the MNR/Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (RENAMO)¹ insurgents: the role of individual leaders, the operational strategy of FRELIMO and RENAMO commanders in the field, the battles they fought, and the lives of their troops. Emerson charts the interaction between domestic and regional decolonisation struggles in Mozambique, Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, and South Africa, underlining the important dynamics between liberation struggles and white resistance, insurgency/counter-insurgency.² In doing so, the author looks at the original emergence of MNR/RENAMO into a self-sufficient force. The Cold War backdrop is identified as a crucial part of this narrative, and its conclusion as a key enabler of the Rome peace negotiations in 1992. However, Emerson firmly believes that opportunities were missed to end the war before this.

Given the relatively benign international environment of détente between the superpowers in the 1970s, the Cold War as a battle of systems and ideas permeated Mozambique from different sources and in different ways. From 1977 to 1980, the Carter Administration adopted a highly deliberate ‘hands-off’ approach to Mozambique, whilst ideas of African Marxist developmental models enjoyed a relatively supportive intellectual climate amongst the European Left in the 1970s. The needs of the new government were indeed acute. The Machel government was the beneficiary of international aid and assistance – the Labour Government of James Callaghan in London channelled developmental assistance and technical training for the newly independent state through the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation – as well as Soviet and East European (principally from the GDR) military training and logistical assistance. In contrast, motivated by their own strategic calculations and Cold War perceptions, the Rhodesian Central Intelligence Organisation exploited disparate social and economic tensions within newly independent Mozambique, prompted by FRELIMO’s radical agrarian programme and administrative reorganisation. The author explores the responsibility of the Salisbury government for the training, equipment and deployment of the nascent MNR/RENAMO forces, FRELIMO’s increasingly aggressive response, and the impact of the spiralling violence upon the Mozambique rural population. Again, the brutality of the struggle for capture of the post-colonial state, which appeared only occasionally in the newspapers, took insurgency and government response to new depths. In a story which is too familiar in today’s accounts of insurgencies across the African continent, the civilian rural population was caught in the crossfire, child soldiers were forcibly recruited into both government and insurgent forces, rape was used as a weapon of war, as were extreme acts of terror to intimidate and control. Approximately one million Mozambicans died in this 16-year war, while the violence internally displaced vast numbers and drove millions of Mozambicans into exile.

Based on extensive personal interviews with surviving combatants in the Mozambican theatre, memoir literature, and published secondary sources, Emerson charts this slide of violence as a political language and the crucial input of external actors and finance. Ending the three-sided

¹ Resistência Nacional Moçambicana/Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo, Mozambique National Resistance).

² See David Martin and Phyllis Johnson, *The Struggle for Zimbabwe: The Chimurenga War* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1981).

civil war in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe in 1979 assumed an existential importance to the Machel government. (In October 1979 alone, the Rhodesian security forces' raid on Mozambican infrastructure caused over \$11m of damage, and Emerson highlights the extent to which the Rhodesian security forces were actively prosecuting the external war throughout the Lancaster House negotiations in London in late 1979). Machel hoped that the ending of the war in Rhodesia would spell the end of the MNR insurgency. Whilst the FRELIMO government had backed Robert Mugabe's ZANU/ZANLA faction within the Patriotic Front going into negotiations in London in the September, it was Machel's message to Mugabe that failure to accept the Lancaster House settlement in December would result in the withdrawal of Mozambique's support for rear bases and training camps. This clinched the ZANU leader's decision to sign.

Machel's hopes of the end of the war in Rhodesia meaning domestic peace in Mozambique were dashed. With the internationally recognised independence of Zimbabwe in April 1980, South Africa took over responsibility for finance and training of MNR/RENAMO and organised the removal of fighters and their equipment from their base at Odzi to the north eastern Transvaal. The dramatic expansion of South African military assistance ensured the growth and reach of the insurgency, as the civil war in Mozambique therefore was drawn more firmly into the Pretoria government's counter-insurgency strategy and associated regional destabilisation. The South African government and its security forces were determined to ensure that the ANC and its armed wing, MK, did not acquire forward bases. (Indeed, the South African military's continued covert assistance to RENAMO was the principal reason for the breakdown of the Nkomati Accord of 1984 – which ran directly counter to the regional policies being pursued by the South African Department of Foreign Affairs.) The Cold War permeated this regional struggle, although the perceptions and outlook of the PW Botha government were far from identical to those of the Reagan and Thatcher administrations. The enduring ideological connections and alignments between National Liberation Movements as parties of government are underlined as the ZANU-PF leader President Mugabe sent in Zimbabwean troops to assist FRELIMO in defending infrastructure, key road and rail transport routes. These troops bore an increasingly heavy burden of the fighting and many of the black members of the former Rhodesian security forces, now integrated into the Zimbabwean National Army, lost their lives in the ongoing war.

Emerson closely follows the interplay of these actors, as well as noting the incoming Reagan Administration's and Congress' markedly differing views of the FRELIMO government and the ideological attractions of their RENAMO opponents. (Documents available in the Margaret Thatcher Foundation archives bear out the consistent message from the British government of the undesirability of supporting RENAMO.) President Reagan's own diary, edited by Donald Brinkley, includes a telling reflection on Machel's visit to Washington in September 1987: ("Turned out to be quite a guy & I believe he really intends to be "non-aligned" instead of a Soviet patsy. We got along fine."³ Reagan recognised Machel to be an African nationalist, rather than a Marxist, but that it would be hard to convince people on Capitol Hill of this.) As the war ground on in the late 1980s, FRELIMO forces adopted an increasingly defensive posture which left the strategic initiative to RENAMO.

The book focuses primarily on the military dynamic between the FRELIMO forces and their MNR/RENAMO opponents, and the author has taken considerable care to fill in the gaps and to cross-reference and triangulate the veracity of statements. Emerson's long interest and engagement with Mozambique is evident. However, the book comes across as having been written from a relatively narrow American Anglo-phone perspective. It is importantly limited in its range of secondary sources, the handling of the primary material, and the scope of the analysis, and incomplete and imperfect in its citation of its primary material and interviews. Its declared purpose is to get 'the facts' straight in the struggle between the newly independent

³ Douglas Brinkley, ed., *The Reagan Diaries* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 354.

FRELIMO government and the growing insurgency of MNR/RENAMO between 1977 and 1992. At the start, Emerson states firmly that the war in Mozambique is one of the most overlooked of the region's struggles in the Cold War. It is certainly true that the liberation struggle and white minority resistance in neighbouring Rhodesia have attracted a wide literary outpouring, from the 'Rhodesiana' of memoir literature from former white members of the Rhodesian security forces (Timothy Stapleton's *African Soldiers and Policemen in Colonial Zimbabwe 1923–1980* is a welcome study of the black Zimbabwean majority within the Rhodesian security forces), to academic studies on liberation combatants and most recently the struggle over ideas of the Rhodesian state.⁴ Similarly, the struggle to end apartheid in neighbouring South Africa has produced a rich field of study from diverse domestic and international perspectives; and the long war in Portugal's colony of Angola continues to attract serious study and publication (for example, Justin Pearce's excellent *Political Identity and Conflict in Central Angola 1975–2002*).⁵ In comparison, the complex impact of the Cold War struggle on Mozambique and the dynamics of the war itself have indeed been relatively ignored, but there are important works in English (which the author himself cites),⁶ Portuguese, and French. Similarly, the author's declared purpose to 'set the record straight' fails to identify where he deems that narrative to be distorted, partial, imperfect, and downright flawed. Emerson has conducted an impressive range of interviews with surviving RENAMO combatants and former FRELIMO soldiers, but the identification of these interviewees is highly varied. Similarly, he has sourced hitherto inaccessible documents from the Rhodesian military intelligence – again, there is no indication of the location of these archives – as well as US documents which would appear to be in his possession. The analysis offered in this book would have been immeasurably strengthened by drawing on a much wider range of multi-lingual archives and sources and by expanding its interpretive framework to include the Mozambican rural population's view of and engagement with the struggle, which shaped self-interest and political loyalty. Similarly, it contains a number of factual errors (such as the date of Zimbabwean independence) which would have been easily corrected with a careful copy-edit. Overall, therefore this is an interesting book of military history, which is well written and accessible and which certainly adds to our overall knowledge. But it is not the definitive account of the struggle in Mozambique.

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⁴ Timothy Stapleton, *African Soldiers and Policemen in Colonial Zimbabwe 1923–1980* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2011); Luise White: *Unpopular Sovereignty: Rhodesian Independence and African Decolonisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁵ Justin Pearce, *Political Identity and Conflict in Central Angola 1975–2002* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁶ Maylin Newitt, *A History of Mozambique* (London: Hurst, 1995); Alex Vine, *RENAMO: From Terrorism to Democracy in Mozambique* (York: Centre for Southern African Studies, University of York, and Eduardo Mondlane Foundation, Amsterdam, 1996); Joe Hanlon, *Revolution Under Fire* (London: Zed Books, 1984); *Beggar Your Neighbors: Apartheid Power in Southern Africa* (Oxford: Catholic Institute for Race Relations in collaboration with James Currey Publishers, 1986); Paul Moorcraft, *Inside the Danger Zones. Travelling to Arresting Places* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2011).