

BOOK REVIEW

Michel Cahen. “*Não somos bandidos*”. *A vida diária de uma guerrilha de direita: a Renamo na época do Acordo de Nkomati (1983–1985)*. Lisboa: ICS-Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, 2019. 398 pp. Documents. Statistics. Appendix. Bibliography. Footnotes. Index. £ 21,39. Paper. ISBN: 978-972-671-542-9.

Michel Cahen’s book *Não Somos Bandidos* deals with the National Resistance of Mozambique (Renamo), an armed group that fought the Mozambican Liberation Front (Frelimo) regime from 1972 to 1992, and its role today as the main opposition party. Cahen’s work deconstructs mainstream narratives that present a different story, vilifying Renamo as “armed banditry” and an illegitimate organization in the service of neocolonialism.

On August 28, 1985, the Mozambican government attacked the Renamo headquarters, located east of Serra da Gorongosa, an episode that made way for the escape of the guerrillas and their leaving behind most of their war material and part of their archives. After the Nkomati agreement on October 4, 1984 (stipulating non-aggression and good neighborliness between Mozambique and South Africa), according to Frelimo, the archives proved that the agreement had been violated, as South Africans “continued clandestinely, but actively, to support Renamo with war and non-war material” (23). Afonso Dhlakama, chief commander of Renamo, claimed that these publications were forgeries by the Mozambican government. Cahen, however, has published those excerpts known as “Cadernos da Gorongosa,” which show that South Africa was very much a participant in Renamo’s maneuvers, contrary to the Nkomati agreement.

It was in this context that Michel Cahen’s investigation emerged, in which he endorses the veracity of these publications, due to their complexity and detail. In total, 3401 messages were confiscated, most of them handwritten, giving information about Renamo’s locations, structure, military equipment, hierarchy, and the nature and duration of fighting, as a “battle for the population” (28). There was also information about voluntary or non-voluntary recruitment and desertions, those wounded and killed in combat or by disease, the centralization of goods and the repression of the black market among the guerrillas, schools and hospitals in the Renamo area, witchcraft, relations with civilians and militias, sexual relations, psychology of

combatants, “simple soldiers,” and various levels of the hierarchy (28). The messages embodied in “Doc. 28” reveal the guerrillas’ relationship with the rural population, the facsimile document on page 359, titled “We are not bandits,” providing the book’s title. Renamo had strong social roots, bringing together a multiplicity of marginalized social actors linked to the Frelimo rejection of the rural world.

Cahen presents the notebooks seized by government services as “a treasure for the history of the present time” (25), even though their complete contents are not known. Their primary importance lies in the fact that they were internal texts and never intended to be published, which makes their study a rare opportunity of the utmost importance. The author came to the conclusion that Afonso Dhlakama was referred to by the pseudonym “Zacarias Pedro,” which is an interesting detail for further research. There is a promise that the database may soon be made available in free access.

Cahen’s perspective is a breakthrough. In spite of the evident support received by Renamo from Rhodesia and South Africa, the Mozambican civil war must be understood by incorporating local meanings from its actors, giving it context, in the contradictions manifested in the country’s post-independence period. This is particularly true of the relationship between the state’s rural areas. It is in this context that, according to Cahen’s perspective, there are three “irrefutable” conclusions which allow us to view the past differently: Renamo in the years from 1983 to 1985 had nothing to do with the (1) constellation of groups of “armed bandits”; (2) nor with a group of mercenaries; (3) nor with the phenomenon of “warlords,” which are a fixture in many protracted civil wars (355).

Cahen’s book is divided into seventeen chapters, which contain many facsimile documents, maps, and tables with statistics, including a well-developed appendix on Renamo’s regional military capabilities in 1984–1985 (363–98). Cahen concludes by stating that Renamo “should be included in a branch that would be the plebeian guerrillas within the framework of late capitalism” (362).

In the last thirty years, Cahen, who is a senior researcher at the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique–Sciences Po Bordeaux, France), has dedicated himself to the history of Mozambique, becoming an international authority. With this publication, he brings about a structural historiographical change by not accepting the image of Renamo, its meanings and idiosyncrasies, as it is presented by the narrative of Frelimo, which has been in power since the country’s independence.

Vítor de Sousa 

*University of Minho [ICS-Social Sciences Institute / CECS-Communication and Society
Research Center]
Braga, Portugal*

doi:10.1017/asr.2022.100

vitordesousa@ics.uminho.pt

If you liked this, you may also enjoy:

- Steve Askin. 1990. "Misison to Renamo: The Militarization of the Religious Right." *African Studies Review* 18 (2): 29–38.
- M. Anne Pitcher. 1996. "Conflict and Cooperation: Gendered Roles and Responsibilities within Cotton Households in Northern Mozambique." *African Studies Review* (3): 81–112.