The Uses of the Colonial Military History of Mozambique.
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Résumé
D. N. Beach — Comment user de l'histoire militaire du Mozambique.
A partir d'une analyse de l'ouvrage de Pélissier sur la conquête portugaise et la guerre de libération au Mozambique et de celui de Serra sur l'art militaire traditionnel, l'auteur remet en cause les stéréotypes usuels concernant les guerres coloniales, en particulier celui de l'inégalité fatale et sempiternelle des forces en présence. Il pose, à partir de ces observations, le problème de la réaction militaire des gouvernements indépendants aux mouvements de rébellion (spécifiquement ici, la Renamo).

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One of the most enduring images of independent Africa in the eyes of the outside world is political instability. This image takes three main forms: firstly, there is the comparatively bloodless coup d'État in which the military move from the barracks to seize the capital and thus the State; secondly, the regional revolt in which local minorities refuse to accept the former colonial boundaries as final, and attempt to secede by force; and thirdly, there is the organization on a national scale of guerrilla warfare intended to take the countryside and then to drive the government from power in the capital itself. One African State that faces the latter problem is Mozambique.

However, before examining the Mozambican case, it is worth looking at the problem of rebellion against modern African governments and the similar problems experienced by their early colonial predecessors, in terms of warfare. Clearly, there are significant differences, but just how significant they are varies from case to case. In politics, an obvious difference is that the 'rogues' agreement' by which colonial powers did not usually encourage African rebellions against each other has fallen away; many non-African and African States can and do support rebellions across national borders. In economic matters, the whole pattern is far more complex than it was in the early colonial era, all the way from the boardroom of a multinational company to a peasant and his cash crop, but in many ways things have not changed, and people still rely on hoes to get a living from an unpredictable land. In military matters, one would think that aircraft, motor vehicles, radio and automatic weapons would have revolutionized warfare, but, just as Vietnam demonstrated the limitations of technology to the USA, so Africa has tended to reduce military techniques to the age-old question of whether or not infantry can dominate the ground. In this matter, it has relied upon its vast distances, so that very often warfare has been a question of finding the enemy or, failing that, destroying his crops and herds. For that reason, anyone interested in the question of rebellion in modern Africa would do well to look at the original means by which the colonial powers conquered their territories in the first place, as any modern African government faced with the problem of rebellion is, after all, starting out from much the same bases as the old colonial power and confronting much the same mountains, rivers and scrub as its predecessor.


But, the average reader might wonder, wasn’t the original colonial government so overwhelmingly powerful that such a comparison is not worthwhile? Didn’t colonial campaigns of conquest correspond to the following cliche? (1) European troops advance into ‘unpacified’ territory armed with machineguns; (2) the Africans obligingly charge en masse, waving spears, in the style of Verdun or the Somme a few years later; (3) the Europeans massacre the Africans, accept their surrender and establish colonial rule. The answer is that, yes, sometimes it was like that, but that more often the process of colonial conquest was slower, even messier and with the military balance slightly less unfairly distributed. Granted, it is difficult to imagine an ‘alternate-probability universe’, as the science-fiction writers put it, in which Africa was never conquered by Europe: even Ethiopia fell to the Italians in the 1930s. But it is all very well to talk of ‘historical inevitability’ in this context: in the end, no matter how powerful European industrial capitalism might be, the conquest depended upon some colonial soldier making decisions somewhere in the African terrain. Such episodes as Adwa and Isandlwana showed how often the wrong decision could be made, but, conversely, in the end the colonial military made the right decisions and the area marked out on the map as a ‘colony’ was conquered. Between the ‘easy’ conquest of cliche and utter disaster as at Adwa lay a wide range of campaigns, and nowhere are they better displayed than in Mozambique.

Mozambique is a lusophone republic in south-east Africa, which gained independence from Portugal in 1975 after an armed struggle of over ten years. It is enormous, as large as the cultivated part of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia put together, larger than the whole of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, and shaped remarkably like both these entities. Since independence, its Marxist government has been fighting several campaigns at once: against natural disasters such as drought and floods; to establish socialism; to repair the damage created by the flight of the Portuguese settlers; to restructure an economy unbalanced by world capitalism, in general, and by the anglophone territories that border it, in particular; and against the South African-backed Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (RENAMO) guerrilla movement that seeks to destroy it. On the outcome of this last and crucially important campaign hangs the fate not just of Mozambique alone, but of Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Swaziland and South Africa itself, as well as Botswana and Lesotho, an area approaching that of Western Europe.

Mozambique exists today because, after four centuries of hanging on to a chain of ports up and down the Indian Ocean coast and the Zambezi, at the end of the 19th century the Portuguese managed to get the British and Germans to accept their claim to a vast and irregular hinterland reaching inland from their ports. But this was merely a claim on paper: to make it real, the Portuguese had to fight their African ‘subjects’ until 1920. This long and bloody process has been written upon before mostly by Portuguese colonial and anglophone ‘Africanist’ historians, but always with a regional emphasis: an overview of the whole process has not been available. However, 1983-84 saw the publication of two important works on war in Mozambique that are essential reading for anyone who wishes to understand the situation in this vitally important country.

Pelissier’s book is enormous, and, given the task that he has set himself, it needs to be. Briefly, it is a military history of the conquest of Mozambique by the Portuguese, based largely upon published sources. But this is a gross simplification. In spite of the fact that Mozambique is such a huge country and that it took the Portuguese more than sixty years to conquer it, Pelissier has succeeded in giving a
blow-by-blow account of virtually every military action, from small skirmishes to major battles, that took place during the conquest, in such detail that the numerous tables that summarize the data, such as the length of each campaign, the forces committed on both sides, the losses suffered, etc., are absolutely necessary to enable the reader to keep track of what occurred. Moreover, although the military side dominates the book, it also gives the reader something of the political and economic complexities that led to the fighting.

Long as this book is, it is remarkably concise: there is scarcely a superfluous word. It is Mozambique, not the author, that makes the book so long. Nor does the simple statement that the book is based on published sources give the reader a hint at the amount of work that has gone into it: the total of these sources is enormous, as the remarkably complete bibliography shows. Doubtless, further research into unpublished documents and oral traditions will modify the picture given in many instances, but a high proportion of the relevant information has been published, and Pelissier’s footnotes reveal a healthily critical approach to dubious and conflicting sources. Pelissier does not claim that he has written the last word on the subject, but he has certainly advanced it very far indeed.

Pelissier starts by rejecting the common connection made between the Portuguese presence on the coast since the 1500s and the colony of the 1900s, a claim that owes a lot to Portuguese propaganda. Instead, he shows that, even in the 1850s, the area actually under even the weakest Portuguese control amounted to no more than a few enclaves on the Indian Ocean coast and the Zambezi river, separated by vast tracts of totally independent African territory. Granted, a creole-dominated economy reached outside these enclaves, but Pelissier is concerned with the political question of who was ‘under’ the Portuguese and who was not. He takes as his starting-point the 1850s because, in his view, it was at this time that the first faint beginnings of a Portuguese revival that led ultimately towards conquest could be seen. There follows a review of the position of the economy of Mozambique during the entire conquest period, and then the real core of the book emerges: the conquest.

This section is enormous both in size and complexity. Basically, it shows how, very gradually, the Portuguese progressed from their position of almost total military and political weakness in their enclaves in the 1850s—enclaves that they seem to have held, in the last resort, because it was in the economic interest of the African rulers to let them do so—to a position in the 1920s up to the 1960s in which they were just strong enough to hold the ‘Mozambique’ created by the colonial borders of the 1890s without armed opposition from the people. This ‘progress’ (in a military sense) was a bloody one for everybody, and, except in the South, a very slow one.

In the early phases, badly-armed, badly-fed and clothed, badly-led and trained columns of African troops under the Portuguese flag went inland to well-merited defeat at the hands of the African independent peoples and African diseases. By the 1890s and early 1900s slightly more effective columns, also largely African, were beginning to win battles and get what looked like the submission of the people. But this was illusory: time and again, apparently ‘conquered’ areas would re-assert their independence, and the whole process would begin again. Finally, and it is not always clear why, a Portuguese re-conquest would turn out to be the final one for that part of the colony, until the independence struggle began in the 1960s. All this is covered, year by year, region by region and battle by battle, in Naissance du Mozambique . . ., and everybody interested in Mozambique remains very much in its author’s debt.

But no book is perfect, and Pelissier does not claim that his is. There are so many angles to this book that a review article cannot focus upon more than a few. In one of these, the question of how the actual fighting was conducted, Serra’s book makes a valuable addition to that of Pelissier.
Serra poses the apparently simple question, 'What was the military organization of the people of what became Mozambique, and why did they lose to the Portuguese?'. This question is a difficult one, the more so as Serra goes right back to the first records of the 1500s, and in only 117 pages of actual analysis Serra does not claim to have answered it fully, but he has made a very interesting contribution, and in many ways the works of the French and the Mozambican historians are complementary. What Serra has done is to get down to the basics of war in African societies outside the Portuguese enclaves. He starts with the social structure, the environment and the causes of wars and then deals with the art of war itself, in the traditional—and logical—division of Mozambique into North, Centre and South. In each region, he deals with the very basics—weapons, tactics, training—and then analyses the nature of war among the Mozambicans themselves and of war with the Portuguese, ending up with questions of strategy. His conclusions, while pointing out the differences between the North, Centre and South, focus upon the total lack of unity among the people, their inability to maintain a long-term war and their weaknesses in terms of weaponry and supply.

Serra's sources are similar to those of Pelissier, though with a greater component of unpublished documents and anthropological works that used traditions and recollections of the people. He tends to draw his evidence from sources of very different dates, and sometimes this works and sometimes it doesn't: I am persuaded by Serra's argument that there was little change in war in the North during this period, but I am not entirely happy about his juxtaposition of evidence on the Mutapa State of the Centre, which comes from the 16th and 18th centuries, as I think significant changes occurred after 1700. I also wonder whether the fabulous 'Zimba' of the Centre and North in the 16th century ought not to have been considered—and possibly dismissed—as military innovators. But these are minor criticisms: in brief, Serra has done a lot to show the situation 'on the other side of the hill' from where the colonial writers recorded the battles in which they took part.

However, there is one outstanding characteristic about these two books that raises them above the level of most works of African history: they are useful. By this I mean that they can be used by non-specialists, in fact by anyone interested in Africa in general and in Mozambique in particular. This is because the evidence they present is put forward in such detail that the reader does not have to be a specialist in order to make use of it: whereas most specialist works present only that evidence that supports the author's conclusions, those of Pelissier and Serra supply so much evidence that the readers can use them to try out their own hypotheses. I propose to pay what I trust the authors will take as a compliment, by using their work to put forward a few arguments—arguments that in some cases repeat their own, but in others derive from their evidence. (If the arguments fail, then of course the fault is mine, not theirs.)

As I pointed out above, in order for the colonial powers to occupy the vast territories that ultimately became the States of modern Africa, they had, in each case, to win a final battle over the African people, which was rarely the walkover that caricatured. Portugal, the weakest of the colonizers of Africa, had considerable trouble in achieving that final victory in Mozambique, and its spectacular military disasters in the Centre, already well-known, are well analysed by Pelissier. But in the end Portugal did win final battles by one means or another, and Pelissier and Serra show us how this was done.

The conquest of the South was quite unlike that of the rest of Mozambique, in that it was very close to the cliché of colonial campaigns: in mid-1894 the great Gaza State was more or less intact, but by the end of 1895 the Portuguese had
marched in, slaughtered the attacking Gaza spearmen with repeating and automatic weapons and subjected the State. Apart from the rising of 1897, there was no further resistance. Why was this so? As Péllissier and especially Serra make clear, a major reason for the decisiveness of the Portuguese victory was that the Gaza State had been so centralized that, when its centre was seized, there was no framework for further resistance in the provinces because the Gaza themselves had eradicated popular resistance to any kind of central rule. In other words, ‘the bigger they come, the harder they fall’. But this only explains why the Portuguese victories proved decisive, not why they won. Serra in particular stresses the divisions among the Gaza themselves and the reluctance of many of their subjects and neighbours to join them, and both authors add to this a weakened economy, a lack of supplies, and a number of other factors. Obviously these mattered, but even if all the people of the South had united behind the Gaza rulers it is difficult to envisage them winning as long as they relied upon frontal charges against magazine rifles and machine-guns, and as long as the Portuguese made no serious mistakes. This reliance upon the frontal attack is seen by Serra as being rooted in the typically pastoralist orientation of the men of the South. (Perhaps one can be more specific: Serra’s evidence makes the Southerners, after about 1700, the only people of Mozambique to make regular use of shields. This might have been so successful against spear, axes and arrows that the Southerners simply would not stop using them in the face of high-velocity bullets: they had guns in 1894-95 but made poor use of them.) The conquest of the South was also atypical in that the Portuguese made considerable use of White troops, but Péllissier in particular shows how often they used African auxiliaries. Even when they did not play a major rôle in the battle, the mere fact that they were aligned with the Portuguese altered the odds in the favour of the latter, as even the biggest African States had only finite numbers of men of military age.

Both Péllissier and Serra analysed the conquest of the South, but Serra’s choice of writing a short book obviously precluded his doing the same for the enormously complicated campaigns of the Centre and North, so for these we rely entirely upon Péllissier, using Serra for extra insights based upon the general nature of war in these regions.

The final victories in the Centre took place as late as 1917-18. These were not really against unconquered Africans, because after repeated campaigns the Portuguese had gained what appeared to be submissions from most of the people of the Centre by 1902. Although there were sporadic acts of resistance for the next fifteen years, they were exactly that, sporadic, and the Portuguese faced very little armed opposition, but when it came it was serious. Portuguese misrule had culminated in exceptional levies of forced labour to meet the needs of the war against the Germans in the North, and the result was a widespread revolt in a huge arc from Zumbo to Gorongosa, along the south bank of the Zambezi. Yet again, the Portuguese were driven back to their traditional enclaves. Péllissier fits together a particularly intractable collection of sources to outline the campaign of suppression, but in this case even he finds it hard to squeeze the details of the actual fighting from the documents. Broadly speaking, the Portuguese raised a force of perhaps 15,000 Ngoni and Makanga mercenaries by promising them whatever loot, especially enslaved women and children, they could seize from the ‘rebels’. From Péllissier’s work, it looks as though the strategy of the Portuguese was to shift this huge cloud of mercenaries from one sector to another: they seem to have used them first to counter-attack around the crucial river port of Tete in May-June 1917, then to wipe out the ‘rebellion’ in the Zumbo sector from August to September and then to strike south from Tete to reconquer Barwe from October-November, before ‘mopping up’ in Barwe in a series of smaller actions that went on until 1920. (This is probably over-simplified.) As far as tactics are concerned,
again the evidence is not clear. It seems a fair guess that both sides were using a mixture of muzzle-loading guns and single-shot breech-loading rifles and that, from previous campaigns, the actual fighting consisted mainly of assaults on fortified stockade-villages and of extended skirmishes through the croplands. If the mercenaries were in fact not much better armed than the 'rebels', then probably the decisive factor was that the Portuguese leaders could concentrate far more men in any one spot than the more scattered 'rebels'. No war is pretty, but this kind was more disgusting than most. Unarmed men were killed, women and children enslaved, villages burned, and one would suspect that crops were destroyed as well. Most of the comments on this brutal process by previous writers have tended to concentrate on the moral—or rather, immoral—side, but it had a military side as well: such a process simply demolished the economy of the people and interrupted the agricultural cycle upon which life depended. (Indeed, the very cause of the 1917-18 rising in the Centre, the levying of forced labour for service in the North, weakened the capacity of the people to resist by removing so many men of military age.)

Now, in one way this brutal process was not entirely new: Serra's work indicates that this kind of warfare had been practiced in African wars in Mozambique in the past. But what was different was the sheer scale of the giant raid carried out under the Portuguese flag, for nothing quite so destructive seems to have occurred in the wars of the Centre before. (Except possibly the Zimba wars of the 16th century?) In short, the Portuguese did not simply conquer the Centre using African troops, as Pélissier stresses, but using African methods as well.

The conquest of the North, as detailed by Pélissier, partly conformed to the pattern of the Centre, but it had its own peculiar features. Here, the final conquest was also in 1917-18, and here too the Portuguese had apparently 'pacified' the area for a few years previous to that date. This had been an even slower process than in the Centre. As Serra points out, the reason for this was that the societies of the North were so small and fragmented that they had to be subjected piecemeal, village by village, and this process was not complete even by 1917. Whereas the resistance of most of the peoples of the North had died down temporarily by 1913, the Makonde still held out.

The arrival of an advance force of German African troops in April 1917 and then of the bulk of the German army in November led to the collapse of Portuguese rule. Until September 1918 when they left Mozambique, wherever they marched the African people turned against the Portuguese and welcomed the Germans. To a certain extent this was encouraged by the Germans, who made a clever use of Islamic propaganda in some areas, but the overwhelming reason, as Pélissier makes clear, was that the people were so hostile to the Portuguese that they would welcome anyone who promised to get rid of them. (And, consequently, the British who were seen to be fighting to restore the Portuguese got a sullen reception wherever they went.)

Thus, when the Germans left Mozambique, the Portuguese were faced with the task of re-establishing their rule throughout the North. This, from previous experience, should have been another long and bloody process. Yet, with a few exceptions, this was not the case. In two cases among the intractably hostile Islamic polities of the coast, at Angoche and Sancul, the Portuguese used their African troops to put down resistance on a fairly small scale, while in the Makonde country the Portuguese were able to make a conquest, apparently unconnected to the World War itself, by the familiar method of arming 2,000 Makua enemies of the Makonde and letting them loose on the villages in the old style of the North modified by colonial aid. But—unless I have completely misunderstood Pélissier—outside these areas, though the battered Portuguese administration often took some time to resume control of the districts from which it had been driven out by the Afro-
German alliance of convenience, it did not face armed resistance. Why not? The answer is not clear, but it looks rather as though, just as the Ngoni mercenaries of the Portuguese in the Centre probably conquered that region partly by demolishing its agricultural economy, so the Germans, British and Portuguese may have done the same job for the people of the North as they fought over their ground. And thus Northern Mozambique would have been finally conquered for the Portuguese as a by-product of the struggle between the other two colonial powers.

In the paragraphs above, I have tried to use the work of Pélissier and Serra to look at the final battles for Mozambique in the colonial conquest. To have done full justice to their work and to look at all or some of the previous battles would have taken a much longer review. I started this review article by claiming that control of the ground by military means is, ultimately, the greatest problem an African State faces until it develops such national consciousness that regional revolt is no longer a danger; I then claimed that it was highly relevant for those interested in such questions to look at the way the colonialists conquered their colonies in the first place, and then I claimed that Pélissier's *Naissance du Mozambique* and Serra's *Arte militar moçambicana* were highly relevant to the study of this process in Mozambique. I wish that I could claim that Mozambique's problems of rebellion could be simply solved by reference to these books. Unfortunately, works of history rarely have such direct applicability: nothing like the Gaza army nor, one hopes, two superpowers using Mozambique as a battleground are likely to confront the rulers of Mozambique today. The 1917-18 campaign in the Centre has its parallels with the situation today, but it also has its differences. The idea of sweeping the country with a huge cloud of volunteers to remove RENAMO looks good in theory, but without proper supply the result would be 1917-18-style massacres that the government of Mozambique, unlike the Portuguese, simply could not consider.

Nevertheless, the military do not study past campaigns for nothing, and when the place names of today where the possession of Mozambique is being contested are those of the colonial wars, and Mozambican papers report the formation of militia armed with spears, those interested in war in Africa ignore the work of Pélissier and Serra at their peril.

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