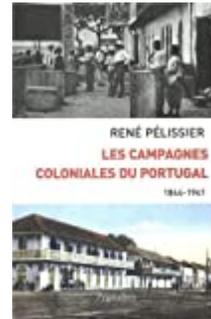


**Rene Pelissier.** *Les Campagnes Coloniales Du Portugal; 1844-1941.* Editions Flammarion, departement Pygmalion, 2004. ISBN 978-2-85704-936-4.



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## Portugal's Struggle to Pacify Its Colonial Empire

For forty years students of Portuguese colonial history have been indebted to René Pelissier's voluminous works—many of them privately published and focused largely, though not exclusively, on the military history of the empire. In particular, his two-volume histories of Angola and Mozambique charted in meticulous detail the largely forgotten colonial wars and campaigns of “pacification,” the narrative supported by a dense scaffolding of tables and statistics.

These works were not always readily accessible and the copious information which filled them not easily extracted. Now the author has decided to distill the contents of ten of these volumes into a single manageable book. The reason is clearly and vividly explained in the introduction: “This book has been born out of a reaction against the ignorance or self-conceit of the majority of specialists in this subject who, at best, only interest themselves in the recent expansion of Portugal with a pitying condescension” (p. 10). The scholarly world has either ignored the Portuguese colonial empire or, even worse, has accepted the myths concerning it that have been too

easily peddled, not least by the Portuguese themselves. As far as general knowledge of the Portuguese empire goes, “an hour in class 5 is worth more than a hundred theses from Heidelberg or Oxford” (p. 9). With the publication of this book there will be no excuse for this general ignorance, at least in the French-speaking world.

The book has two general chapters by way of introduction and then proceeds to take a chronological tour through the Portuguese empire, describing the various military campaigns in succession, regardless of their geographical location. The study starts somewhat arbitrarily in 1844 and ends with the Portuguese airforce hunting cattle thieves in southern Angola in 1941. Chronology is hugely important for the historian but to adopt this approach, which involves moving from West Africa to Timor and back to East Africa, with an occasional look at India, places the Portuguese experience at the center of the study. Although Pelissier has a lot to say about conditions in the various colonial theaters of war and the experience of the indigenous inhabitants, these experiences are always subordinated to the narrative of Por-

tuguese military expeditions. However, this is not really a history of Portugal either, and the domestic context is often left unexplained. If war is nothing more than the continuation of politics by other means, as Clausewitz famously said, these studies of wars often lack the corresponding political matrix.

The author claims that he is not going to enter into the “scholastic debate” over the economic or uneconomic nature of the empire and then proceeds to do so, concluding strongly on page 68 that as Portugal set about the conquest of an empire “that it was too proud to give up ... [t]he honour of the fidalgos, or what remained of it, was at stake.” He also admits to a certain admiration of Portugal, which found ways of achieving so much with so few resources. He quotes Charles Guillain’s description of Mozambique in the early nineteenth century as a “dusty corpse only preserving its form thanks to the immobility of the environment in which it found itself.” He goes on, “there was no lack of carrion crows and undertakers around the ‘Portuguese mummy’ in nineteenth-century Mozambique, but Lisbon would in the end chase them away and find sufficient subterfuges and even the strength to breath life into the flesh which had escaped corruption” (p. 49).

There is a slightly old-fashioned feel about this approach. Although it is right that the violence that accompanied colonial occupation should never be forgotten—and this is quantified by Pélissier in great detail—the old paradigm of colonial conquest followed by African resistance, burgeoning nationalism, the struggle for independence, and final liberation has long since ceased to have any real purpose in interpreting what has happened in Africa in the last forty years. Modern African studies are characterized by a focus on the continuities between

pre and postcolonial political and social formations, the survival and transmission through the colonial period of older ideas about power and how it is negotiated. Moreover the interaction of Africa with the non-African world is now seen in terms of incorporation into wider communities defined by the oceans. African history as such has been overlaid by Atlantic history, Mediterranean history, Indian Ocean history, with the African populations playing an important role in regional economies and a central role in the process of creolization. The very weakness of Portugal as a metropolitan power in the nineteenth century, which is emphasized again and again in this book, has to be contrasted with the strength and expansiveness of the Portuguese creole communities which in some circumstances confronted Portugal in these obscure colonial wars and sometimes acted as surrogates for Portuguese power. Pélissier, of course, knows this and his description of the Portuguese armed forces makes clear the extent to which Lisbon depended on the locally recruited *guerra preta* of the creoles. Africa, he says, was “conquered by its own inhabitants” (p. 58).

The main task of this book is to catalogue the endless military campaigns with their dates, numbers of troops, and casualty lists, a task of encyclopaedic importance. However, the discerning reader can also enjoy the rich imagery and turn of phrase with which this narrative is presented. “The Portuguese conquest of Mozambique,” Pélissier says, “was not achieved by magical incantations at the tomb of Vasco da Gama but by passing over the tens upon tens of thousands, not to mention hundreds of thousands, of corpses which for generation after generation Africa, heedless and forgetful, allowed to be sacrificed to some blind Moloch” (p. 58). Pélissier’s book is scholarly, readable, and completely indispensable for all students of the subject.

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