

## [de Menezes Paredes on Cahen, "Não Somos Bandidos": A vida diária de uma guerrilha de direita; A Renamo na época do Acordo de Nkomati \(1983-1985\)'](#)

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**Michel Cahen.** *"Não Somos Bandidos": A vida diária de uma guerrilha de direita; A Renamo na época do Acordo de Nkomati (1983-1985)*. Lisbon: ICS, 2019. 298 pp. 25.00 EUR (paper), ISBN 978-972-671-542-9.

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### Guerrilla War in Mozambique

The historiography of the Mozambican Civil War is experiencing a profound turnaround. Commonly treated in a broad perspective as a case of “a war-by-proxy,” the Mozambican conflict has remained largely unperceived in its particularities and idiosyncrasies. Worse, African political or military agency has been overshadowed by the notion of acting as a simple puppet played by the Cold War superpowers. There are many consequences associated with this macro approach. One of them is a massive bibliography biased by its sympathy toward Frelimo’s interpretation of the civil war. In this strand, the reason of the war itself is closely tied to official discourse about Renamo’s rebels, commonly vilified as illegitimate neocolonialists, that is, “armed banditry.”

Fortunately, this one-sided perspective is being challenged by new studies that put the social and political significance back in rural African hands choosing micro frames rather than the macro scale. Works like *The War Within: New Perspectives on the Civil War in Mozambique 1976-1992*, edited by Eric Morier-Genoud, Michel Cahen, and Domingos do Rosário (2018), or *The Battle for Mozambique: The Frelimo-Renamo Struggle, 1977-1992* by Stephen A. Emerson (2014), just to mention two recent books, have relevant information that allows us not to consider Renamo/MNR (Resistência Nacional Moçambicana/Movement of National Resistance) as “armed banditry” anymore.

Regarding its reasons and political objectives, the study of Renamo’s political thought and social connections gives a fresher outlook. Not neglecting the evident (and proven) support Renamo received from Rhodesia and South Africa, the Mozambican Civil War should be understood by looking at it from the inside, incorporating local meanings. This perspective highlights the proper contradictions of the Mozambican political post-independence context, principally the relationship between the state and the rural areas and their respective cultures. Therefore, the force of internal evidence needs to be acknowledged before analyzing the impact of international pressures on the conflict.

This historiographical perspective has a starting point with Christian Geffray and his *La Cause des*

*Armes au Mozambique: Anthropologie d'une Guerre Civile* (1990). This strand was followed by Cahen in his *Les bandits: Un historien au Mozambique* (2002) and *Os Outros: Um historiador em Moçambique* (2003). Now, with his last work "*Não Somos Bandidos*": *A vida diária de uma guerrilha de direita; A Renamo na época do Acordo de Nkomati 1983-1985* ("We are not bandits": Daily life of a right-wing guerilla; Renamo at the time of the Nkomati Accord), he achieves and consolidates a powerful historiographical shift treating Renamo not through Frelimo's prism but on the basis of its peculiar local meanings.

Cahen is a senior scholar who has dedicated over thirty years of academic research to Mozambican history. His prolific and exhaustive academic production has made him an international reference. This broad experience gives him the knowledge needed to interpret the Gorongosa Papers, a rich source of insightful information written by Renamo. This documentation was seized by Frelimo in August 1985 after the Renamo's headquarters—the Banana House in the Gorongosa mountains—was attacked by Frelimo military forces. They first came to public knowledge through an official publication organized by the SNASP (Frelimo's political police) in a carefully edited version created to sustain the official discourse. The latter essentially holds that Renamo was a mere regional armed ally of South Africa's apartheid, which meant, at the time, that Renamo did not have any legitimacy or political project, being no more than a bunch of mercenaries. Rather than having his hands tied with this "filtered" version, Cahen had the rare opportunity to access the entire authentic Gorongosa Papers. The book's great significance stems precisely from an accurate interpretation based on this tremendous rich primary source: 3,401 messages (mostly manuscripts) written by Renamo's local groups and officers to the general staff from 1983 to 1985.

The book is divided into seventeen chapters and contains an appendix consecrated to Renamo's military and regional apparatus. It consolidates a brand-new perspective on Renamo's political motives, military organization, internal rules, and ethical concerns, and shares details about how the guerrilla dealt with the rural population, traditional chiefs, strategical information, food supplies, health issues, traditional healers, education, internal and external sexual relations, and soldiers' discipline. After reading such a varied amount of information, the reader gets a rigorous and in-depth picture of how Renamo's staff interpreted themselves, Frelimo, and the war itself in the context of the Nkomati Accord.

The most crucial conclusion to be drawn from Cahen's new book is that South Africa is rarely mentioned in the Gorongosa Papers. Rather than a constellation of armed banditries, Renamo was an ultra-centralized and highly bureaucratized commoner guerrilla movement with political and military objectives. Renamo had strong social roots gathering a multiplicity of marginalized social actors connected to the rural rejection of the unity-party Frelimo's state's authoritarian modernization process. They could include entire ethnic groups, peasants entangled by Frelimo's communal villages, uneducated young people from rural areas or urban peripheries, traditional chiefs, and traditional healers puzzled by the new political and cultural patterns the postcolonial state promoted.

Beyond these pivotal statements, the attentive devotion that Cahen's analysis gives to Renamo's messages' social meaning should be highlighted here. In a series of detailed footnotes, we are introduced to a variety of actors and nouns that symbolize the Mozambican guerrilla context's inner particularities. For example, we could emphasize the importance of the *Mudjibas* (the rural informants), or the significance of the *Capricones* (double agents in the civil war), or even the

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difference in treatment between Renamo soldiers with “their population” and the “population of the enemy.” Throughout, the messages from “Comandante Zacarias,” the pseudonym used by Afonso Dhlakama, a prominent Renamo leader, the guerrilla’s particular world is presented.

More important than that is the explanation of Renamo’s ethical norms and Dhlakama’s concerns to maintain good relationships with the rural population. He did so by trying to ban the use of *nipa* (a handcrafted distilled liquor), lootings, rapes, and any lack of discipline inside the military camps by threatening their troops to be killed or to be *chamboqueados* (physically punished). The existence of those rules does not mean that those actions did not occur but, instead, means that they did not occur as a *planned policy*. At the time of the negotiations for the Nkomati Accord, and after that, having good relations with local communities was vital to Renamo’s intentions: they needed to prove “they were not bandits.”

Not by chance, “we are not bandits” is the title of Cahen’s new book, which represents a significant turnaround on the Mozambican Civil War historiography. To anyone interested in the so-called Mozambican Sixteen-Year War or in a perspective from within of the postcolonial challenges in the southern African context, “*Não Somos Bandidos*” is a mandatory reference.

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