

# Cann, John P. Counterinsurgency in Africa: The Portuguese Way of War, 1961-1974. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1997.

Richard Dale

Volume 18, numéro 2, fall 1998

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs18\\_02br04](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs18_02br04)

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Dale, R. (1998). Compte rendu de [Cann, John P. Counterinsurgency in Africa: The Portuguese Way of War, 1961-1974. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1997.] *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 18(2), 131–133.

**Cann, John P.** *Counterinsurgency in Africa: The Portuguese Way of War, 1961-1974.* Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1997.

John Cann's study dealing with the Portuguese attempt to curb, if not eradicate, the pro-independence African armies in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau is yet another indication of scholarly (and sometimes polemical) interest in how wars were lost by colonial (or major) powers. Vietnam and the second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) are cases in point of this near growth industry. By way of contrast, the (three) wars in Lusophone Africa have generated less popular interest than the Vietnamese or even Algerian wars, and the community of Africanists has tended to be more fascinated by anti-colonial success rather than by colonial failure. Such wars seem to be consigned to the musty world of case studies for military command and staff colleges. They have produced no major motion pictures or great war novels. These three African wars for independence have too small an audience if only because many Western commentators were fascinated by the political and economic ineptness or failures of those Angolan and Mozambiquan post-colonial regimes with Marxist-Leninist rhetoric and trappings. Few were the Americans or Canadians who had the requisite language skills and military expertise to write intelligently about the wars in Lusophone Africa.

The basic argument is that Portugal ". . . mobilized an army, transported it many thousands of kilometers to its African colonies, established large logistical bases at key locations there to support it, equipped it with special weapons and matériel, and trained it for a very specialized type of warfare . . ." It did so, contends the author, ". . . without any previous experience, doctrine, or demonstrated competence in the field of either power projection or counterinsurgency warfare, and . . . without . . . any instructors who were competent in these specialties." (p. 1 for both quotations). Thus, what Dr. Cann termed the Portuguese way of war ". . . focused on a subdued, low-tempo style of fighting that was a function of its constrained resources and low technology." (p. 187)

What is particularly appealing about this study by a retired US naval officer, who earned a doctoral degree in war studies from King's College of the University of London, is his demonstrable access to the Portuguese military establishment and sources. The author makes the most of his interviews and correspondence with those officers who fought in the three campaigns as well as of the Lisbon-based records of the armed forces. This enables him to track down the flow (and revisions), say, of counterinsurgency doctrine from the British and Americans. The Americans, however, tended to be ahistorical in terms of comparative civil-military affairs, and military lessons tended to be forgotten not long after they were written down. Only recently, for example, has there been a resurgence of studies dealing with US counterinsurgency in the Philippines in the Spanish-American War; the fascination in counterinsurgency literature had centered on the Huk rebellion in the Philippines just after the close of the Second World War.

Such wars are difficult to fight for they often run counter to large-scale principles of troop organization, to say nothing of military sub-cultures that may emphasize different sets of career incentives, or civic cultures that place a premium on patience and even tolerate opaqueness in military results. Wars of this sort are fraught with consequences

for the counterinsurgent power, as the American experience in Vietnam so cogently demonstrates. Cann's study is a welcome addition to the literature of comparative guerrilla warfare studies particularly because of its consistent concern with what the Portuguese armed forces learned, where they learned it, from whom they learned it, and how they passed on these lessons to the troops in the field. The author deftly weaves into his analysis and description reference to what the British, French, and Americans did (well or ineptly) or failed to do, and the consequences of such action or inaction.

Particularly significant is his treatment of how the Portuguese armed forces developed a sustainable counterinsurgency doctrine, drawing upon previous French and British practice, and then implemented that doctrine in the field. What intrigues the author is how a relatively small nation, with a dwindling pool of manpower, and modest levels of technology managed to continue to wage war in three African territories (Guinea-Bissau, Angola, and Mozambique) for no less than thirteen years. Part of the success is due to Portugal's ability to recruit, equip, and train a wide array of specialized units from local populations, including Bushmen in Angola (who served with equal distinction in the South African Defense Force in Namibia). This offset the shortfall in the metropolitan recruitment area and reduced long-range troop transportation costs from Portugal to the African colonies. The metropolitan-recruited soldiers, however, became casualties at a higher proportionate rate than their African fellow soldiers, thus undercutting the argument that shifting the recruitment base would put the Africans at greater risk than their Portuguese comrades-in-arms. There was political opposition to the African wars in non-democratic Portugal, conscription evasion, and increased taxation; the colonial wars were terminated as a result of the 1974 military *coup d'état* which, much later, led to a democratic system and acceptance into the European community.

This study is exemplary in its tight organization and attention to detail, which will make it attractive to military readers, and its topical arrangement of chapters facilitates comparative analysis with American, French, and British military doctrine, organizations and techniques. Paradoxically, the relative poverty of the Portuguese nation prompted its military to fashion its military organization and order of battle, as well as civic action and resettlement programs, in a parsimonious manner. Less was sometimes better, particularly when the Portuguese army reconfigured itself into a counterinsurgency machine by stressing the light infantry structure (which the Americans did not do when fighting in Vietnam) and integrated its African and non-African troops (which neither the British nor the French had done). The Portuguese military did hold the African nationalists at bay for quite some time and provided some degree of political space for the resolution of the conflict. They could not, however, compete with these nationalists in terms of legitimacy, as the author correctly notes (on p. 194). The bibliography, which includes works in both Portuguese and English, is quite helpful, but the index is not as detailed as it ought to be, and the four maps are only adequate. The author could have added more material on the role of the Portuguese African military forces in the First World War, some of whom did battle in Mozambique with the legendary German Colonel (later General) Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, who held out against the British and their allies in German East Africa (later Tanganyika) throughout the entire First World War and earned the admiration of both friend and foe. It is his contention (on p. 95) that

ever so little is known about Portugal's African army in the First World War; if so, why not enlighten the historians among his readers? Certainly, von Lettow-Vorbeck is well-known as a superb guerrilla fighter who earned the highest German decoration, *Pour le Mérite*, from the Kaiser. His opponents merit some, if not necessarily equal, attention.

Richard Dale

Fountain Hills, Arizona