

BOOK REVIEW

Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman. *Mozambique's Samora Machel: A Life Cut Short*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2020. 258 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$17.95. Paper. ISBN: 9780821424230.

Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman's biography of Samora Machel, *Mozambique's Samora Machel: A Life Cut Short*, is a sterling example of Ohio University Press' *Short Histories of Africa* series. Over less than 200 pages of engagingly written prose, it narrates the life of Samora Machel, who led Mozambique to independence and served as the country's first president until his untimely death. Machel's biography also offers an entry point for the Isaacmans to analyze the struggle for Mozambican independence, the political philosophy of Mozambican socialism, and the broader history of postcolonial Mozambique.

Following a heartfelt foreword by Albie Sachs and an illuminating Introduction about the authors' personal experiences with Machel, the book's chapters follow the course of Machel's life. The first chapters discuss Machel's youth against the backdrop of oppressive Portuguese rule, before discussing his role in forming the anti-colonial movement FRELIMO (Mozambican Liberation Front) and the political and philosophical infighting that marred its early years. This initial section culminates in Machel's contested ascension to power, his successful marginalization of his internal competitors, and FRELIMO's transition into Mozambique's ruling party following independence. The subsequent chapters offer insightful analyses of Machel's magnetic personality and the way it shaped his governance as President. It also analyzes his political philosophy and its comparative relationship with other varieties of socialism, in Africa and beyond. The book then moves to chart the difficult history of Machel's time as President: economic paralysis, peasant discontent, FRELIMO infighting, and, especially, a prolonged and devastating assault on Mozambique by the white minority regimes in neighboring Rhodesia and South Africa. The most important consequence of Rhodesian and South African aggression was the emergence of RENAMO (Mozambican National Resistance), which waged a catastrophic, sixteen-year civil war against FRELIMO rule.

Contained within these chapters is the authors' diagnosis of the problems of Machel's rule. Some of these problems were the consequences of his government's policies: the widespread use of re-education camps and internal exile, the summary execution of perceived internal enemies, and the failed attempts at peasant collectivization. It is, nonetheless, the external factor of Rhodesian and South African aggression which the Isaacmans hold largely responsible for Mozambique's postcolonial torments. In their analysis, Rhodesia and South Africa bear primary responsibility for facilitating the rise of RENAMO,

and consequently for the ruinous war that devastated Mozambique during the 1980s. It is also the South African government which the Isaacmans hold responsible for Machel's death in a plane crash in 1986. The final chapters examine Machel's legacy in Mozambique in the decades since his death, and his complex impact on the country's politics, both inside and outside of FRELIMO's power structures.

The book is well-organized and highly readable, and it does an admirable job of balancing attention to its subject with a broader discussion of the political and social contexts in which he operated. Readers unfamiliar with the history of Samora Machel, or with Mozambique itself, will find this to be a valuable and accessible entry point into the most important facets of the country's modern history. But the book also has much to offer those who already know something of this history. The Isaacmans' experiences with Machel offer many important insights into the intersections of his personal and political personas. Indeed, the book is perhaps at its strongest when describing Samora beyond just a political figure, as a human being trying to put his political principles into everyday practice. Pulling back the curtain of a standard political biography, the authors reveal Machel's tangled family relationships, particularly with women; his life experiences with racism and dispossession under Portuguese colonial rule, and the impact of these experiences in shaping his political philosophy; and his immense personal charisma and its vital role in animating his public profile.

These strengths also bring complications. The book is primarily a narrative history that is largely told from the perspective of Machel, and most of the source base consists of interviews with his close confidants and documents from the Samora Machel Documentation Center. The authors are aware of this dynamic, addressing it extensively in the book's Introduction. They endeavor to incorporate critical perspectives on Machel's life throughout the book, particularly when discussing the intra-party disputes that eventually brought Machel to power, as well as his time as Mozambique's president under single-party FRELIMO rule. But even as the book discusses these critical perspectives, its interpretive framework largely adopts Machel's view of Mozambican politics. This is, to some degree, an appropriate reflection of the book's topic, but it is also a product of the sources and methods it employs.

Overall, this is an excellent work, which does a superb job of surveying Samora Machel and his era. It offers an outstanding introduction to modern Mozambican history for a general audience, while adding depth to the understanding of specialists. Parts of it will not be convincing to those who have formed competing visions of Mozambique's past. Nonetheless, readers of all backgrounds will find much to recommend in this lively and engaging book.

Zachary Kagan Guthrie 
 University of Mississippi
 Oxford, Mississippi
zkguthri@olemiss.edu
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