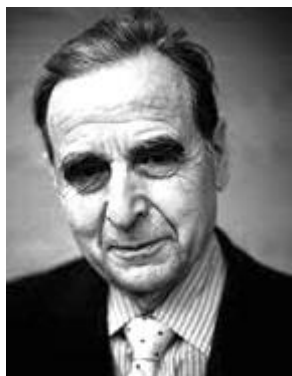


DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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PÉLISSIER, René (Nanterre, 1935)

René Pélissier was born on 24 October 1935 in Nanterre, on the outskirts of Paris. His family, originally from Auvergne in central France, had settled in the Paris region from the 1900s onwards, joining the large Auvergnat community that had been "migrating" en masse to the French capital since the second half of the 19th century.

Despite his modest social origins and the loss of his father at the age of 14, René Pélissier excelled in his secondary education. He then enrolled at the Sorbonne, where he graduated in English Studies. Simultaneously, he had the opportunity to attend Union College in New York during the 1955–1956 academic year, under the status of a Fulbright student. In 1955, he also made his first trip to Lisbon as an interpreter for a senior Swedish official. It was during this period—following his initial studies on the Spanish Empire—that his interest in the history of the Portuguese Empire emerged. It was, therefore, within this context that he began to conduct significant scientific research on the Portuguese colonies in Africa. From 1965 onwards, René Pélissier became an associate researcher at the prestigious *Centre national de la recherche scientifique* (CNRS), where he would later serve as a *Directeur de recherche* [Director of Research]. Thanks to an invitation from the *Junta de Investigações do Ultramar* [Board for Overseas Research], he was able to conduct extended visits to Angola and São Tomé and Príncipe in 1966. Subsequently, under the supervision of Henri Brunschwig—a renowned specialist in French West Africa—he began his doctoral thesis, focusing on the Portuguese campaigns of occupation and pacification in Angola, a subject never before studied at a French university.

His extensive doctoral thesis, entitled *Résistance et révoltes en Angola (1845-1941)* was defended at the Sorbonne in 1975 and later became the basis for his first two books, published in 1978 and 1979: *Les Guerres Grises. Résistance et Révoltes en Angola (1845-1941)* and *La Colonie du Minotaure. Nationalismes et Révoltes en Angola (1926-1961)*. The first of these won the *Prix Kastner-Boursault* from the Académie Française in 1978. Establishing himself as a tireless researcher of Portuguese campaigns of pacification and colonisation in the 19th and 20th centuries in Angola, Mozambique, Guinea, and Timor, René Pélissier published several books in subsequent years, including *Naissance du Mozambique. Résistance et Révoltes Anticoloniales (1854-1918)*, *Timor en Guerre. Le Crocodile et les Portugais (1847-1913)*, *Naissance de la*



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Guiné. Portugais et Africains en Sénégal (1841-1936), and the more concise *Les Campagnes Coloniales du Portugal (1841-1941)*. This extensive body of work has been fully translated into Portuguese (in 1986, 1987, 1989, 2006, and 2007) and, in most cases, has been reprinted several times.

The central theme of René Pélissier's research, which was globally groundbreaking at the time, lay in deconstructing the "myth of five centuries of Portuguese colonisation" (Mesquitela Lima, "À propos de deux ouvrages," 1980: 512). He highlighted the theory that "Lusophone Africa" was only truly conquered and, consequently, colonised from the beginning of the final decades of the 19th century. In this context, he demonstrated how the "first age" (Pélissier, *Les campagnes coloniales du Portugal*, 2004: 21) of Portuguese presence, both in Asia and Africa, was primarily based on trading posts and the slave trade, occupying only a minuscule fraction of the territories that would eventually be effectively colonised from the mid-19th century onwards. Similarly, the historian emphasised the ongoing conflicts that arose from that time between Lisbon and the colonised populations. Challenging the focus that the years 1961–1974 placed on studies related to the "Overseas War," René Pélissier advanced another original theory: that the outbreak of conflict in 1961, particularly in Angola, was merely the final phase of a nearly century-long cycle of resistance wars against Portuguese presence. From this perspective, he concluded that the 25th of April 1974 (the Carnation Revolution) was simply the end point of a colonial project that had repeatedly failed under the Constitutional Monarchy, the First Republic, and the *Estado Novo*, due to a lack of economic, military, and social resources to keep pace in Africa with the colonising momentum of the major European powers.

Pélissier's study of a century of recurrent Luso-African wars also allowed him to demonstrate how the Portuguese colonisation of the 19th century, particularly in Angola (1979) and Mozambique (1984), replicated the old practices of maritime empire-building from the 15th century. This colonisation relied on the one hand, on negotiation with indigenous authorities and, on the other, on collaboration with the local elites descended from the Portuguese expansion on the continent during the 15th and 16th centuries. Thus, the historian underscored the crucial importance of the mixed-race elites in the Portuguese colonial administration of the 20th century, as well as their progressive break with Lisbon and the emergence of independence movements from within these elites (1979, 1984, 2004).

Basing his research on a colossal volume of sources, particularly from the *Arquivo Histórico Militar* [Military Historical Archive] and the *Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa* [Geographical Society of Lisbon], René Pélissier is, in short, the first author in the historiography of the Portuguese empire to produce a detailed and still-relevant history of the hundreds of colonising campaigns undertaken by Portugal from 1848 onwards. Within this framework, he stands out as the author who effectively dismantled the "myth"—an important component of both the old *Estado Novo* stereotypes and the slogans of African liberation movements—of five centuries of Portuguese colonisation in Africa. Furthermore, by meticulously describing the recurring revolts against Portuguese authority that began in the second half of the 19th century, as well as the subsequent pacification operations carried out by Lisbon—and the often underestimated or outright ignored extreme violence of these operations during the First Republic and in the early 1940s under the *Estado Novo*



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(Pélissier, *Les campagnes coloniales du Portugal*, 2004: 233–310)— René Pélissier also helped to debunk another significant cliché of 20th-century national historiography: the myth of the Portuguese colonisers’ “tolerant customs.” Similarly, while challenging the rhetoric of the independence movements, he did not shy away from highlighting how the narratives of these movements often involved the incitement of skirmishes, well before the 1960s, accompanied by occasional massacres of civilians.

Finally, the monumental bibliographical work conducted by René Pélissier from the 1980s onward is particularly noteworthy. Following a methodological approach grounded in collecting testimony from all types of printed sources and a firm conviction never to limit his research to works written in the official language of the studied country, the historian published a series of books in which he traced and examined all the studies on the colonisation and decolonisation of Lusophone African countries and Timor (see 1981, 1991, 2006, 2015, and 2017). For example, one of his most recent works, *Angola. Guiné. Mozambique. Sahara. Timor, etc. Une bibliographie internationale critique (1990–2005)*, offers over 1,700 reviews in a comprehensive, annotated bibliography of all the internationally published studies on the contemporary empires of Portugal and Spain in Africa and Asia. His latest work, *Le Sud-Angola dans l'Histoire. Un guide de lectures internationales* (2017), catalogues and evaluates around 1,200 international studies, organised by themes and periods, dedicated to southern Angola. *Le Sud-Angola* highlights the paradoxical status of this predominantly desert region of Angola, ignored for centuries by the Portuguese but, during the 19th century, situated on the “fault line” between colonial powers such as Britain, Germany, and France, and later becoming one of the theatres of the Cold War. This remarkable volume is undoubtedly another significant addition to Pélissier’s monumental body of work on the “third Portuguese empire,” written over five decades by what has been described as an “untiring pioneer of the political-military history of the Portuguese empire in the second half of the 19th and 20th centuries” (Cahen, “Les campagnes coloniales du Portugal,” 2007: 215).

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