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N. 7
2026

Fascicolo 27. Luglio 2026
Storia Militare Moderna

a cura di
GIAMPIERO BRUNELLI



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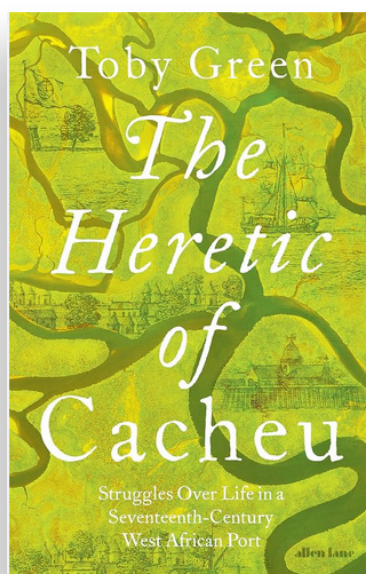


Vienna, Monumento equestre al Principe Eugenio di Savoia, particolare.
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TOBY GREEN,

The Heretic of Cacheu
Struggles Over Life in a Seventeenth-Century
West African Port

Penguin, 2025, £25.00



Toby Green's book is a scholarly study of the profit-sharing and multiple linkages that made up both empires in general and Atlantic trading practices in particular. If that is not exactly unprecedented, with particularly valuable work already for Angola, Green's study, nevertheless, is of considerable significance, not only for the literature on West Africa and the Portuguese empire but also more generally. The themes are those of the 'world history' that rose to significance in the late twentieth century and that has in a way been challenged by the more tendentious tendency to focus on exploitation and to deny agency to non-Westerners. Green of course in part has to express this perspective, whether

racial, economic, gender, historiographical, or literary, and he is overly prone to see violence as a metaphor for more complex forms of relationship, but, throughout, his scholarship rests on solid foundations.

His point of departure, but continual reference, are Inquisition documents, notably those relating to the 1665-8 interrogations of Crispina Peres, the most significant trader in the port of Cacheu in modern Guinea-Bissau, and a woman of African-European heritage. As Green, who understands this subject-matter very well, points out, imperial survival was a key theme: Cacheu could not survive through force imposed on its neighbours, but only by dialogue. Intermarrying and close ties with African peoples were crucial, not least in order to ensure access to native spiritual and pharmaceutical resources, the latter an element underplayed in accounts of Angola. So also with the supply of the enslaved and their commodification. Green is adept at showing how this led to pressures on psychological assumptions and kinship practices, and how Western-directed enslavement was highly disruptive, which led to a measure of resistance: African agency was far from monolithic, and Green is a thoughtful guide to this and to the crisis-driven transformation that was context and consequences. He underplays, however, the extent to which local tribes played the key role in enslavement and to which 'pre-contact' [with Europeans] slavery was similar in many respects to its European dimension.

Green argues that this transformation was linked to fear, panic, disease, and the search for cures, the latter shaping a range of relationships including gender, religious and political ones. The lasting role of African realities is a major element, but so also are the disruptions brought to West Africa. Green is good on those from the West, but possibly less so on placing due weight on dynamic elements in Africa, notably (although he does discuss the question) the pressure from Islam, both in the *Sahel* and further south, although this pressure was not central to the Guinea-Bissau region. Referring to 'the genocide of the Native Americans' is problematic, not least as the majority of deaths arose from disease. Yet, alongside such caveats, the strong impression is of a first-rate study that deserves attention.

JEREMY BLACK



Johann Georg Ziesenis (1716-1776). Portrait of Friedrich the Great (1763).
Sans-Souci Palace. Wikimedia Commons

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