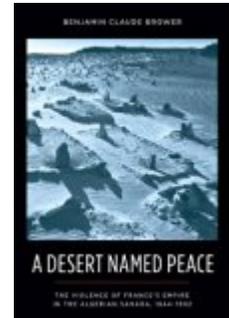


Benjamin Claude Brower. *A Desert Named Peace: The Violence of France's Empire in the Algerian Sahara, 1844-1902.* New York: Columbia University Press, c2009. xv + 417 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-51937-3.



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Commissioned by Amy A. Kallander (Syracuse University)

A Desert Named Peace is a study of the different shapes and forms of violence perpetuated by the French, and in some cases violence inflicted on them, as they brought the Algerian Sahara under French control. After the conquest of the Tell, the French embarked on the process of colonizing the Algerian Sahara with the conquest of Biskra in 1844 and completed it with the massacres of the Kel Ahaggar Tuareg at Tit in 1902. This book explores French motivations to conquer the Algerian Sahara as well as French perceptions of the Sahara and its inhabitants, which resulted in policies that brought destruction, disruption, and death to Saharan societies. As the author puts it: “The violence done to Algerians reflected the meanings that had circulated in texts written by colonial planners, army officers, in-house orientalists, government officials based in Paris, and so on. But it also placed them on real bodies” (p. 18).

Those real bodies and “the *multiple* logic of French violence” inflicted on them are dynamically illustrated in the engaging story that Benjamin Claude Brower weaves together (p. 6). Based on a

rich body of literature and archival material, the story moves between metropolitan France and the different oases of the Algerian desert. While this book is an important contribution to French colonial history in the nineteenth century, it is also a precious addition to the growing field of Saharan studies.

Through the study of French violence in Algeria, the author situates his work in the broader historiography of colonial violence. He argues that violence is not a singular phenomenon but one with a complex logic that manifests itself in many forms and thus, it needs to be addressed from multiple angles. This same complexity applies to responses to colonial violence that cannot always be simplified into mere acts of anti-colonial resistance. By establishing an overarching paradigm in which the perpetrators of colonial violence and of Algerian responses to it are considered as “actors,” the author offers a rich and sophisticated analysis that moves beyond the simplified dichotomies that usually characterize stud-

ies of colonial violence and anti-colonial resistance.

Before elaborating on how the author skillfully makes his case, one comment is due. The author could have avoided a misstep when, in the preface, he connects the violence in nineteenth-century Algeria to that of Algeria's civil war in the 1990s. The claim that this work offers a backdrop to understanding violence during Algeria's civil war is unsubstantiated. To be clear, the aim of the book is not to verify such a link. No analysis is undertaken for this purpose. Rather, the author takes it for granted that a better knowledge of nineteenth-century patterns and modes of violence would explain those in the 1990s. As James McDougall has warned us, the invocation of ancestral violence in Algeria portrays a simplistic view of Algeria's rich and complex history (*History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria*, 2006). Nevertheless, this conceptual error on Brower's part is marginal to the otherwise strong and engaging analysis he provides in this book and should not undermine the value and richness of the work.

The book is organized into four parts, in addition to a preface, an introduction and a conclusion. The first part anchors the French conquest of the Algerian Sahara in a metropolitan milieu rife with debates and tensions over the French revolutionary past, where the conquest was alternately conceived of as a military redemption, an act of political legitimacy, or an intellectual project bringing civilization to the Sahara. Despite such differences, the monarchy, the army, as well as the Saint-Simonians colluded on the need to conquer the Sahara. The course to be followed was one of a "Pénétration Pacifique." French illusions about the Sahara turned this "peaceful conquest" into campaigns of plunder, brutality, and massacres. Between Biskra, Laghouat, the Ksour, and Zatcha, the French marked their different stages of conquest in the 1840s and 1850s with apocalyptic carnage and destruction, highlighting the stark

contrast between French discourses and policies as well as between idealist theorists and military commanders and troops.

The second part offers examples of Algerian responses to this conquest. The author focuses here on small-scale movements of anti-colonial resistance in order to show the different meanings that certain acts directed against the French can take and embody. By scrutinizing the different motivations and objectives of the Algerian actors, Brower moves beyond a linear narrative of national resistance that usually simplifies, and in some cases misrepresents, acts against the colonial order. He highlights the deep impact of the French conquest on Saharan societies, exemplified not just by physical violence but also by a disrupted political ecology and broken chains of power and authority, and economic crises bringing devastation to many parts of Algeria. It is from within those distortions in Saharan societies that meanings for anti-French acts are excavated. The attack led by Si Tayeb of the Rahmaniyya Sufi order on Djelfa at the northern edge of the Algerian Sahara in April 1861 provides an exemplary case study linking violence against the French to crises of leadership and economic displacement. What emerges is a picture that problematizes what, on the surface, may look like acts of heroism and resistance, as individuals seek to adjust to new realities or benefit from them for different purposes and interests, including self-motivated ones. However, while Brower's intriguing analysis of Si Tayeb's personal interest prompts us to carefully consider acts directed against the colonial order, it does not explain what motivated those who assisted him in the attack, especially those who carried out murderous activities. This oversight runs the risk of downplaying the general discontent among average Saharans at the expense of highlighting "a hidden second plot" (p. 93).

Further elaborating on the French destruction of the social fabric of Saharan societies, Brower devotes the third part of the book to the

ambiguity of French policies toward slavery and its abolition in the Sahara. Brower takes the journey of Saaba, a girl enslaved in Niger and brought through Timbuktu to the Algerian oasis of Ouar-gla, where she was bought by a French explorer, as the central story around which he weaves his, again, very diligent and engaging analysis of French policies towards abolition. The French unevenly applied the abolition law of 1848, resulting in a “three-tiered” response that advocated a forceful policy against slavery but accommodated low-profile cases, protected strategic interests, and used a selective enforcement of the law in order to reward allies or punish defiant Algerians. The French “eyes-closed” policy resulted in much confusion among slaves, slave traders, and slave owners. It was also meant to protect French interests, including commercial relations with Saharan traders, especially in the oases of the Mzab, annexed in 1882. The French not only accommodated slavery there but also buttressed the position of slave owners.

Brower’s discussion of the French-Mzabi relationship brings the Algerian as an “actor” back to the stage. He offers a solid account of French policies toward slavery and sheds light on an important yet understudied region of the Algerian Sahara, the Mzab. However, while Brower intended to showcase French policies toward slavery as another form of violence brought upon Saharan societies, this part reads as stand-alone and is not fully integrated into the theme of violence Brower establishes in previous parts of the book. It fits more as a showcase of “the broader military-administrative culture in Algeria” than of the physical violence described earlier (p. 210). Moreover, the story of the slave is based on an account left by her buyer. The author took the account at face value, making no critical assessment of the degree to which that account was indeed that of the slave herself and not peppered by the buyer’s own imagination and stereotypes about slaves in Muslim societies, as is the case with many such accounts left by Europeans. While such details

would not have altered the author’s analysis of French ambiguous policies toward slavery in the Sahara, they deserved the scrutiny the author applied to other texts he used as historical sources.

The fourth part covers a later phase of French conquest that brought the rest of the Sahara under French control. It has the same rhythm as the first part, being anchored in a textual analysis revealing French cultural and social tensions in the second half of the nineteenth century. In this phase, the French created a colonial “imaginary” of the Sahara that ultimately qualified violence as a state of normalcy. Reflecting an air of pessimism, French Romanticism portrayed the Sahara as a land of extremes as well as nostalgic escape. The Romantic aesthetic of the sublime was central to that imaginary, rendering the Sahara a landscape of apocalyptic destruction ordained by God and with the French as his agents. It is within that culture of imaginary that the “Blue Legend” of the Tuareg emerged, pioneered mostly by Henri Duveyrier, but endorsed by many others, including Saint-Simonians. The image was that of the Tuareg as a “white,” noble Saharan savage who was the perfect ally to facilitate and welcome French conquest of the Sahara. This invented image of the Tuareg served also the purpose of an “antidote to modernity” representing a European past untainted by the revolution. Moreover, this search for the virgin past in the Sahara corresponded with French fascination with indigenous societies. The relevance of this part to the discussion of violence as an overarching framework of analysis becomes apparent in the conclusion of the book. The “Blue Legend” collapsed, as did the “Pénétration Pacifique” before it, in the face of the reality of French military operations in the Sahara and the mindset of military planners rather than intellectual philanthropists. And after all, the Tuareg the French encountered in the Sahara were not the production of French imagination. They were part of a society defining its terms with the French based on different considerations and motivations, and as with other communities in

the Sahara, mutual acts of violence delineated some of those terms.

And thus, amidst all the disorder and chaos within French ranks and the incoherence of their different policies towards the Algerian Sahara, violence emerges as the only systematic course of action and coherent strategy characterizing the French conquest.

The meticulous account of that conquest is based on formidable archival material and on primary sources that the author effectively uses and skillfully analyzes. His French sources are exceptionally impressive, though his Arabic material is meager. It is true that he approaches his topic as a French historian but that does not obviate the need for a richer body of Arabic material. His inclusion of the Mزاب in his study should have provided him with the opportunity to consult the incredible depository of Arabic sources housed in several private libraries and cultural institutions throughout the Mزاب. While it is understandable that some Saharan societies would lack written historical records and those would not necessarily be in Arabic, that is not the case with the Mزاب, where there is a strong written tradition in Arabic.

In sum, this is a very engaging and rich study of the French conquest of the Algerian Sahara and all the contradictions that marred French rhetoric and policy in the process of incorporating Algeria and its Sahara into the French colonial orbit. Well organized and well argued, it highlights the prominence of violence as a colonial tool defining the course of conquest, a violence perpetuated on indigenous societies but also causing violent engagement by those same societies whose political, social, economical, and ecological landscapes were brutally altered by the French conquest. Even where the analysis deviates from the standard story of violence, the details provided add substance to the harsh realities of conquest and colonialism in the Algerian Sahara.

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