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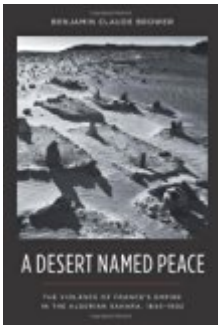
Benjamin Claude Brower. *A Desert Named Peace: The Violence of France's Empire in the Algerian Sahara, 1844-1902.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. 480 pp. $26.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-15493-2.



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French Colonial Expansion and Violence in the Algerian Sahara

Benjamin Claude Brower's important study of French imperial expansion into the Algerian Sahara during the second half of the nineteenth century is a fascinating and well-researched book that ranges broadly over issues and events linked together by the theme of colonial violence. The introduction lays out both the Algerian context for understanding colonial violence in the Sahara and an analytical framework for discussing that violence. Brower distinguishes the chapters to follow from what he characterizes as a common emphasis on a dichotomous framework that pits European states as agents of colonial oppression and colonial subjects as agents of anticolonial resistance. Brower states that William Faulkner's novels inspired him to reject "a dualist perspective" and to focus on what he calls "the multiple logic of violence in colonial Algeria" (pp. 5, 6). The first part of the book emphasizes the distance separating French arguments that expansion into the Sahara would be peaceful from the violent reality of that expansion. In the second and third parts of his book, Brower emphasizes "the violence of local political entrepreneurs … who sought to carve power and influence out of the social mutations triggered by French rule," the ways in which officials "supplemented coercion by exploiting cleavages in Algero-Saharan societies," and the processes by which administrators and local notables accommodated each other where their interests overlapped (p. 7). The fourth part returns to discourses about the Sahara toward the end of the century, pointing to the enduring distance separating colonial mythmaking and the realities of colonial violence. One of the merits of this approach is that Brower draws on extensive research to closely analyze and finely draw scenes that effectively demonstrate the complex nature of the violence of French expansion into the Sahara.

Part 1 presents French justifications of colonial expansion and chronicles the complex ways in which those justifications vanished in military applications of force during that expansion. Chapter 1 explores how, despite growing French frustrations with the costs of invasion and occupation and moral concerns about colonial violence, advocates of a "restricted occupation" eventually lost out to those who called for a Saharan expansion as part of a "total conquest" that General Thomas Robert Bugeaud began implementing as Algeria's governor-general in 1840. Brower details the complex context of Oasis politics in Laghouat and Biskra and into which Bugeaud insinuated the French by establishing alliances with local factions hostile to Emir Abdelkader, who was leading the Algerian struggle against French occupation. In 1844, the French flag was raised in the Sahara in a "bloodless triumph" that appeared to indicate that a Saharan invasion could be not only strategic but also peaceful and cost very little (p. 40). Brower details how apparent success quickly evaporated as the locally recruited defense force at Biskra mutinied and the local notable who had been invested by the French as *khalifa* in Laghouat fled. In the face of reports of these failures and the mounting costs and body count in Algeria, opposition to the occupation increased in the French Chamber of

Deputies, which produced a report that, as Brower puts it, "suggested that only if Bugeaud could expand French influence without the use of weapons would support be forthcoming" (p. 46). As chapter 2 shows, advocates of Saharan invasion were assisted by a handful of authors who discursively reinvented the Sahara to sell continued French expansion as an appealing prospect. While French accounts of the Sahara before the 1840s cast it as a perilous and lifeless ocean of sand, in the 1840s influential figures, like the Saint-Simonians Ismayl Urbain (1812-84) and "Père" Enfantin (1796-1864) as well as Ernest Carette (1808-90) and Eugène Daumas (1803-71), began to reimagine the Sahara as a place that supported large populations who were likely to be French allies and trading partners. By thus discursively recasting the Sahara, these figures contributed to the idea that an invasion of the Sahara would be easy, peaceful, and profitable, and would thus contribute vitally to French security in the North. Chapter 3 picks up in 1847, the year that Abdelkader surrendered, Bugeaud resigned, and the French renewed their expansion into the Sahara. Brower demonstrates that while the discourse of *pénétration pacifique* (peaceful conquest) had convinced many that expansion was worthwhile, in practice that expansion was soon marked by widespread and intense violence. Chapter 3 chronicles the extremely violent tactics used in General Louis Eugène Cavaignac's campaign in the Ksour in 1847, in Brigadier General Emile Herbillon's counterinsurgency in Zaatcha in 1849, and in Generals Aimable Pélissier and Yusuf and Lieutenant Colonel Jean Joseph Gustave Cler's suppression of a rebellion in Laghouat in 1852.

Brower introduces part 2 of the book as an effort "to rethink the national-resistance model of popular movements in the Middle East and to seek new ways to explain the dynamics of their violence" (p. 93). The deadly attack on French-occupied Djelfa in 1861, which is the focus of the three chapters in part 2, certainly offers an example of popular resistance in colonial Algeria of a very different nature than and with a different logic from Abdelkader's struggle or later episodes of national resistance. Brower convincingly shows in chapter 4 that, after French forces began occupying the region, policies meant to establish French authority damaged the region's ecosystem, disrupted pastoral practices, and compromised traditional social and political structures. Chapter 5 is a nuanced analysis of the French policy of creating new structures of authority to undermine or at least side-step traditional ones by appointing "outsiders to the tribes they were to administer" (p. 115). Ultimately, this policy left "local society without effective voices of direction and authority" (p. 116). Chapter 6 returns to the attack to minutely analyze the moments preceding, during, and after it, and to offer an explanation for the peculiarly violent episode. Brower focuses on the leader of the attack: Si Tayeb ben Bou Chandougha, a relative newcomer to the region whose bid for religious authority in a moment of religious and political instability set him "on an especially precarious path" (p. 136). Si Tayeb, Brower shows, was likely driven "to prove to his followers that he continually partook of God's favor" and the best way to do this was to strike at the French, who had demonstrated "their ability to wield superior power–especially violent power" (pp. 136, 137). The message of France's "massive and inscrutable power," which the book's introduction suggests was the purpose behind much of the French violence in Algeria, was, therefore, not lost on some Algerians (p. 17). Clearly, however, that message could be received in ways that French officials neither anticipated nor welcomed.

The three chapters making up part 3 deal with the less visible forms of violence linked to slavery and the slave trade. Chapter 7 discusses the difficulties in using archives to study North African slavery during the nineteenth century, sketches the discursive traditions for and against slavery in North Africa, and lays bare the many forms of violence associated with North African slavery. In chapter 8, Brower explores some of ways in which people responded to the issue of slavery in the 1840s, just before and immediately after slavery was finally officially abolished. Just as they had done before and after the first abolition of slavery in 1794, many officials "subordinated the moral considerations of abolition to the practical issues of colonial rule, preferring to compromise the law in order to accommodate slaveholding elites" (p. 160). Brower examines how in the 1840s two proposals by Eugène Mathieu Subtil and one by Eugène Bodichon encouraged officials to actively settle African slaves in Algeria. These proposals couched the perpetuation and even expansion of unfree black labor in Algeria in the denigrating language of scientific racism but also in pragmatic terms meant to justify French participation in the slave trade as a policy that would benefit the French, the Algerians, and even the slaves. The chapter ends with the reception of the official abolition of slavery in Algeria in 1848 and shows that, despite a forceful official policy against slavery, the colonial administration encouraged an "eyes-closed policy" in low-profile cases and in cases where strategic interests were in conflict with abolition. This theme of colonial accommodation carries over into

chapter 9, which focuses on how French administrators and Saharan notables continued to cooperate well into the late nineteenth century in perpetuating the officially illegal institution of slavery.

Part 4 shifts back to French mythmaking, or as Brower puts it, to "a specific imaginary construction of the Sahara." Chapter 10 presents a number of French explorers and soldiers who shared what Brower calls the "moody pessimism" of "the Romantic spirit" (p. 200). Brower suggests that "Romanticism's emphasis on freedom and energy, the sensual and exotic," by casting the Sahara "as both a place of extremes … and … a place of nostalgic escape," contributed to a French "cult of violence" that legitimized and intensified the violence committed by French troops (pp. 213, 200). Brower identifies a tendency among explorers and soldiers to cast the desert as a deeply violent, destabilizing, and disorienting place that offered an escape from the malaises of modernity but also threatened to unhinge the gates of sanity. The book's final chapter explores how Henri Duveyrier, the privileged son of a well-known Saint-Simonian, was drawn to the Sahara to escape the paternal and cultural constraints on his expansive sense of self. Brower shows that Duveyrier composed influential accounts of the Tuareg that cast them as analogs of Europe's own chivalrous medieval warriors. By thus contrasting the Tuareg with other North African peoples causing trouble for colonial occupation, Duveyrier made them seem like potential allies to whom colonial authorities would turn for assistance, though with few tangible results, in the 1860s. Brower follows Duveyrier's Tuareg mythmaking into the book's conclusion and explores how the "legend" demonstrated its limits in two violent episodes. The first one was the 1881 Tuareg massacre of the Flatters Mission surveying for the trans-Saharan railway. Brower notes that one of the main explanations for the massacre echoed what the book shows to have been a "familiar refrain" in French representations of Algeria and justifications of violence there: that the "indigènes" "grasped only the rules of violence and greed" (p. 242). A second round of violence involving the Tuareg occurred in 1902 and 1903, when Lieutenants Gaston Cottenest and Georges Guillo-Lohan set out to avenge the 1881 massacre by unleashing violence and terror upon the Tuareg.

Brower presents these four parts of the book as being "one story [told] in four parts representing four facets of the same problem" (p. 5). While the book's emphasis on complexity and the multiple logics of colonial violence is one of its greatest strengths, this turns out also to be one of its main weaknesses. Brower recognizes that by "thinking differently about the rise of the French colonial state and its impact" his project faces "hazards," but it is not clear that he satisfactorily either avoids or overcomes some of those hazards (p. 6). Though he rightly resists reductive thinking that would isolate a solitary "source from which flows the darkness of colonial violence," he could have gone further than he does in his analysis of the many sources and general contours of that violence (p. 9). One of the themes of chapters 1 and 3 to which the book's conclusion returns is that the intensity of the violence adopted by French forces in the Sahara was not predicated on any simple instrumentalism. Rather, as the book points out, it was based on the assumption that violence should be unbounded to be exemplary and instill terror. The French troops' brutal excesses in the Ksour, in Zaatcha, and in Laghouat that left these sites as little more than "a mass of ruins and corpses" and the frequency with which the French insisted, as Brower notes, that "the 'Arabs' were naturally 'bellicose' and that they understood and respected only force" certainly suggest the kind of violence unleashed against counterrevolutionaries by General François-Joseph Westermann in the Vendée and by Joseph Fouché and Jean-Marie Collot d'Herbois in Lyon and the attitudes that underpinned that violence (pp. 83, 36). Brower also acknowledges that the violence of the campaigns in the Sahara that he discusses in the first and last parts of the book "expressed certain dimensions of the standard military thinking of the day," which, as he points out, was based on the lessons learned in the violent struggles of the Haitian and French revolutions and in the Napoleonic campaigns. Brower, however, does not attempt to explore this suggestion by locating at least some of the extra-Algerian sources of the kind of violence unleashed in Algeria. He might usefully have drawn connections between French attitudes toward violence and the experiences of French soldiers before and after they arrived in the Sahara.

Brower might also have looked beyond Algeria to ask whether the nature of the violence and French attitudes there are unique or whether they have similarities or echoes elsewhere. For example, while the discussion of the role of the sublimity of the desert in shaping French experiences in and attitudes toward the Sahara is excellent in itself, Brower never notices the ways in which the sublimity of the mountain had already fundamentally shaped the nature of violence during the French Revolution.[1] Brower might also have asked whether French representations of the Sahara resembled how the French imagined the Pacific Ocean into which they were expanding during exactly the same period. In *Preserving the Self*

in the South Seas, 1680-1840 (2001), Jonathan Lamb, for instance, in his discussion about British voyaging literature about the South Seas during an earlier period, has shown that violence and nostalgia were intertwined in ways similar to those described by Brower and also that these writers displayed a similarly overwhelming sense that the encounter with a distant sublime space threatened to destabilize the mind, invite madness, and dissolve the coherence of the bourgeois self. Matt K. Matsuda has noted that French maritime writers cast what they called "the *Grand Ocean*" as "a vast expanse…, an emptiness of routes and exchanges in the manner of the desert sands and caravans" that had to be "written and drawn into being through distance in time and space."[2] Brower, however, never asks to what extent the violence of France's empire in the Algerian Sahara was either a unique case or a typical instance of more general colonial patterns.

Brower could have asked similar questions about the accommodations made between French colonial officials and local elites with regard to practices of the slave trade and slavery in Algeria. Though he concedes that his "findings on abolition in Algeria hold few surprises for the historian of slavery and abolition elsewhere in Africa," the book says nothing about important earlier attempts at abolition and the long French tradition of arguing against abolition as an impractical policy (p. 195). Brower also tends to elide two distinct issues: the slave trade on the one hand and slavery on the other. He states, for example, that "in 1848 the Second Republic had abolished slavery in all French-controlled territories. Slave trading was therefore illegal at Ouargla" (p. 143). In fact, it was the interdiction against the slave trade that was imposed in 1815 and then officially adopted in 1818 that made slave trading at Ouargla illegal. Since the abolition of French slave trade had initially been a British imposition made upon the defeat of the first French Empire, however, many in France were for a long time willing to ignore those who perpetuated the practice.[3] Had this distinction and its broader context been kept in view, the book's third part would have been more nuanced and stronger.

In the end, only the most naïve historian would take issue with the book's broader organizing thesis, which looks to transcend simple binaries of victor and vanquished and proactive and reactive by arguing that colonial violence exhibits a "*multiple* logic," took many forms, and was perpetrated by many different groups and individuals whose interests and motives were often not consistent, and finally that French officials and local elites sometimes found ways to accommodate each other when such accommodations facilitated important common interests (p. 6). When one considers that the Algerian Sahara was a colonial frontier that France only occupied incrementally over a period of fifty years, this argument is less bold than the more significant points driven home in each of the book's four parts. Ultimately, one of the most striking aspects of the book is Brower's reluctance to engage explicitly with Franz Fanon and many others who have shaped our understanding of colonial violence. A more explicit engagement with the growing body of work on the history of civil violence in general and on colonial violence in particular would have gone a long way to ensure that the value of the book as a whole amounts to more than the sum of its otherwise very impressive parts.

Notes

[1]. See Mary Ashburn Miller, *A Natural History of Revolution: Violence and Nature in the French Revolutionary Imagination, 1789-1794* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), esp. 117-123.

[2]. Matt K. Matsuda, *Empire of Love: Histories of France and the Pacific* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

[3]. Christopher L. Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 194-200.

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