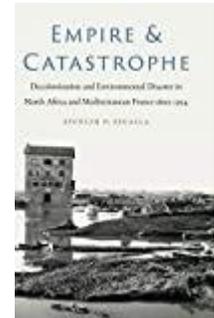




Spencer D. Segalla. *Empire and Catastrophe: Decolonization and Environmental Disaster in North Africa and Mediterranean France since 1954 (France Overseas: Studies in Empire and Decolonization)*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020. 302 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4962-1963-3.



Reviewed by Gregory H. Maddox (Texas Southern University)

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Commissioned by David D. Hurlbut (Independent Scholar)

Empire and Catastrophe is an interesting and creative book linking events and times across a space in an evocative way. While a study of disasters and their aftermaths, it touches on a variety of topics—disasters, memory, trauma, decolonization, the creation of the Other in France, and post-colonial states in North Africa. Spencer Segalla links together four (really five, to some extent) disasters from Algeria, Morocco, and France between 1954 and 1980 to explore not so much differing responses to catastrophic events but the place in memories of such events. He links them all to the great drama of decolonization in the Maghreb and the changes it brought on both sides of the Mediterranean.

Segalla links a devastating earthquake in the French Algerian city of Oransville (now Chelf) in 1954, the flooding of Fréjus on the Mediterranean coast of France due to the collapse of the Malpas-set Dam in 1959, a mass poisoning in Morocco in 1959 caused by adulteration of cooking oil with waste jet engine lubricant from an American-controlled air field, and an earthquake that destroyed

Agadir on the Atlantic coast in Morocco in 1960. He also touches on the 1980 Algerian earthquake that stuck what became known as Chelf again. Segalla uses each of these disasters to explore different elements of the often violent and contested end of the French Empire in North Africa and the emergence of a new order. He notes, “Due to these interconnections, there four events constitute a single object of study, impacting Algerian struggles for independence, French reckoning with the loss of empire, and Moroccans’ endeavors to extricate themselves, even after formal independence, from the continuing military and cultural legacy of French occupation” (p. 5).

While Segalla lingers a bit on approaches from environmental history to human disasters, he does not stay there long. He notes that while two of these disasters had origins outside of human control, humans very much caused two of them. He wants, however, to note the similarity in that the victims had little control on when or how they wound up stricken. He spends some space discussing the actual events of each disaster, in-

cluding the very colonial response to the Orlansville earthquake; the linking of the dam collapse that flooded Fréjus with the ongoing conflict in Algeria; American concerns about limiting political fallout amid opposition agitation about the accidental poisoning in newly independent Morocco; and the way the Moroccan state used the rebuilding of Agadir to promote a modernist vision of an independent Morocco. Not surprisingly, he is more concerned with the symbolic impact of these events than with a comparative history of loosely-linked-by-time-and-circumstance responses to disaster.

Segalla explores the way memoirs evoke the disasters as turning points, particularly for the end of French rule in North Africa. In Algeria, the Orlansville earthquake coincided with the beginning of the Algerian Revolution, and memoirs and popular history both by Algerians and repatriated former settlers cast it as a critical marker in the events that followed. The Fréjus flood both became the subject of conspiracy theories about Algerian partisans operating in France and caused devastation for a growing number of French repatriates and Algeria labor migrants that found their way into popular literature about the event. He has less to say about the Moroccan poisoning, but the Agadir earthquake, and especially the city's reconstruction in a modernist style with international support, becomes part of a discourse about modernism and alienation in the postcolonial era in Morocco. Both events also stand as examples of postcolonial attempts at nation building.

The sources and issues touched on range widely for each of the disasters. Segalla examines memoirs and literary works produced in North Africa that highlight both the trauma caused by the disasters and the link between them and the coming of independence. He touches on the undercurrent of marginalization of Berber-speaking groups in Algeria and Morocco and the in-between space into which colonialism forced North African Jewish communities. He spends some time on the

memories and popular history of *pied-noirs* in the years after Algerian independence that both emphasized a romantic nostalgia for colonialism and signified a rightward shift in French politics.

This work is a unique take on the major events of revolution and the creation of the post-colonial world in North Africa. While grounded in archival work, it takes flight in the literary analysis of contemporary sources that touch on the events. As such it is a fascinating read. It evokes rather than makes explicit the linkages of the events to each other and to the broader themes it wants to address. As a result, it requires some prior knowledge to truly grasp the significance of the work. The result is worth the effort.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-africa>

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