

BOOK REVIEW

Nathaniel K. Powell. *France's Wars in Chad: Military Intervention and Decolonization in Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. xv + 360 pp. Maps. List of Abbreviations. Bibliography. Index. \$99.99. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1108488679.

In *France's Wars in Chad: Military Intervention and Decolonization in Africa*, which was drawn from his 2013 doctoral thesis, Nathaniel K. Powell shines a light on the way France continued to shape the political trajectory of its former Chadian colony after the colony's independence in 1960. As the Frolinat armed rebellion (1960s–1980s) was shaking the country, France launched two military operations (1969–1972 and 1978–1979) aimed at keeping the Chadian regimes in power, in what was to become France's longest lasting and deadliest military intervention abroad since the Algerian War of Independence. But the support given to President Tombalbaye (1960–1975) did not prevent the fall of his regime, and opposition to the Libyan-backed Chadian rebels led to the seizure of power by Hissène Habré, who then ruled the country in a violent dictatorship from 1982 to 1990. *France's Wars in Chad* takes us along the complicated trajectory that turned military success into political disaster. It shows, once again and in a very timely manner, that foreign military victories in independent countries do not necessarily lead to either durable peace or political stability; as in the case studied here, they often have quite the opposite effect.

Based on a meticulous study of the French archives, and leaning sometimes rather “heavily on the work [published in French] of late Dutch anthropologist Robert Buijtenhuijs” (12), the book gives a nearly day-to-day account of these decades of political and military turmoil. From the emergence of the Frolinat rebellion in the mid-1960s to the Libyan invasion of northern Chad in the early 1980s, through the kidnapping of the French archaeologist Françoise Claustre, the clashes between rebel factions, the peace negotiations, and the involvement of neighboring countries in the Chadian conflict, the book reviews every politico-military event in which France was involved in Chad during this time.

Any reader with a specialist interest in and knowledge of the political history of Chad or the military history of France will enjoy these multiple anecdotes, all nicely presented, all the more as, as the author rightly

mentions, there is a “lack of significant English-language coverage of Chadian history” (11). This is less the case in French, and readers more versed in that language might note that the main facts reported in this book have already been documented elsewhere—in French. Beyond this, one can regret that Powell’s almost exclusively archival focus leaves no room for more recent scholarship on the political history of contemporary Chad. This would have added an analytical edge to this “unabashedly narrative history” (7).

The author explains at the outset of the book that “the narrative approach here serves to underline the uncertainties and ambiguities behind French policymaking” (10). This is undoubtedly the case. But by adopting this approach throughout the book, with very limited engagement with social science literature and no theoretical or methodological framework, it becomes difficult to grasp the author’s argument. In other words, one might wonder how the book can help us to think beyond these “uncertainties and ambiguities,” beyond the succession of events recounted in the French military and diplomatic archives. The conclusion of the book does not help us much here either, and the author’s assertion, according to which “the 1979 collapse of the Chadian state marked the clear end to what one might describe as a neocolonial order” (331) comes as a surprise to anybody familiar with the current, very intimate, state of Franco-Chadian relations.

The other major issue that arises from the reading of *France’s Wars in Chad* is about the book project itself. Over the last decades, it has become less and less acceptable to write a history of any country from the sole point of view of the chiefs, the masters, the colonizers, and other rulers, even when they are the object/subject of study. Decades of struggles led by academics and activists, the input of the Indian subaltern studies, of the Italian *microstoria*, of the German *Alltagsgeschichte*, of the French *histoire par le bas*, and more generally the postcolonial and decolonial turns in the social sciences have shown the need to give a voice to those who previously were the voiceless of official histories. Hence, when the author acknowledges that: “most of [his] source base comes from French record collections. Time limitations and financial constraints also meant [he] was unable to conduct research in Chad itself” (11), one cannot help thinking that an attempt to rectify “equal parts” to the telling of contemporary Chadian history, taking into account local archives and oral sources, would have led to a different story.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2021.131

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