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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, 2009. Xv + 417 pp. Bibliography, notes, and index. Cloth \$50.00. ISBN: 978-0-231-15492-5.

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This ambitious book makes a major contribution to the study of empire. Deeply researched and creatively conceived, it draws eclectically on idealist and materialist interpretations, fuses them in interesting if sometimes problematic ways, and provides a new way of thinking about France's effort to control Algeria. The book presents four distinct parts: the first addresses the French military conquest of the Algerian interior; the second, a brutal, spontaneous nighttime attack on a French village led by an aspiring Sufi leader; the third, French accommodations with indigenous forms of slavery after declaring it abolished; and, finally, French Romantic debates about art and politics. The connections among these four parts, however, remain obscure. Brower leaves it to the reader to situate his work and create a conceptual framework for the several narratives it presents, and between those nineteenth-century stories and the more recent past, with which the book opens.

Brower adopts an ironic, postmodern stance that eschews broad, synthetic claims. He compares himself to William Faulkner: "Like *The Sound and the Fury*, my book tells one story in four parts, representing four facets of the same problem" (p. 5). While the multi-perspectival approach makes sense, Brower pushes it too far. He does not establish that his is, in fact, a single story. Despite an introduction called "Understanding Colonial Violence in Algeria" (n.b. not just the Sahara), Brower does not explain what he means by the term "violence." He does not sketch its boundaries, explain how its various manifestations relate to one another, or explore the historiographical context. He notes simply that the "argument moves forward without presumptions, nor does this book take aim at particular paradigms, either to shift them or to establish new ones" (p. 8). He found no "taproot" of violence that could be pulled up and eliminated, nor a "Labroussian paradigm" that could provide a set of structural truths (p. ix). There are no easy certainties here.

The modesty of the book's analytical claims is refreshing but puzzling. The subtitle and introduction suggest grander ambitions than simply calling attention to a handful of overlooked cases of French brutality. The case studies, moreover, do not appear to have been selected at random. Brower's focus on the Sahara and overlapping narratives imply a challenge to the way historians have understood the violence of settler colonialism in Algeria in particular, and modern imperialism more broadly.

Like much work on political violence written in the wake of Bosnia, Rwanda, Iraq, and Afghanistan, *A Desert Named Peace* downplays the significance of centralized state power. It provides a vision of empire in an age of great-power overreach. Like Jean-Clément Martin's work on violence in the French Revolution, J. Arch Getty on the Stalinist Terror, and Mark Mazower on political violence more generally, Brower suggests that extreme violence is not inflicted by all-powerful, absolute authority.[1] It results instead from what Martin called a "défaut d'État," the absence or weakness of a state desperately trying to impose its will, forced to rely on auxiliary forces and make accommodations with the enemy.[2] Brower's work might well be seen as part of what Lynn Hunt characterized as an

ongoing re-evaluation of state breakdown as a cause of political violence in her contribution to the H-France Forum on Martin's book several years ago.[3] Brower quite rightly points out that a great deal of violence fits uneasily in the traditional dichotomy between colonial oppression and organized anticolonial resistance. Like Mazower, Brower suggests that historians have been distracted by exceptional cases of mass violence. He calls attention instead to the nearly unceasing outbreaks of small-scale, sporadic violence that predominated in the nineteenth century. This book examines *l'Algérie française* at the margins, at the limits of French control, in the Sahara, and not in the bitterly contested coastal zone where virtually all European settlers lived. Those settlers, central to most accounts of colonial violence in Algeria, figure here only in passing.[4] Brower usefully breaks taboos in his discussion of indigenous Algerian violence, especially the slave trade. The incompleteness of French control, authorities' inability to impose their values or their will on the majority of the population led them alternately to court and punish slave traders, and sometimes to allow settlers free reign to enforce justice where the state could not do so.

While Brower is too good a historian to assert a single cause for so broad and complex a set of problems as "colonial violence" --if such a thing exists in the singular--all his examples and all his research underscore the chaotic unevenness of French control, not its overwhelming power. His book would have benefited from a forthright and sustained discussion of recent work on the history of political violence and his choice to move the center of analysis from the coast and its immediate hinterland to the interior. Doing so would have enabled him to establish the specificity of the colonial encounter in the Sahara and avoided giving the impression that the recurrent cycles of violence throughout Algeria's recent history were unavoidable, the inevitable product of the landscape and indigenous inhabitants.[5]

The last section of the introduction and the first part of the book presents a compelling, compact overview of the military conquest of Algeria. If a paperback edition appears, these chapters will be particularly useful for classroom use. Although it contains little that will surprise specialists, this section draws on available Algerian as well as French sources, including Brower's own work in the colonial archives at Aix. He charts the shift in French policy in the 1830s, from a restricted occupation to a full-blown colony of settlement, and he shows how French military thought and practice became progressively more aggressive. The generals of France's African army-- Clauzel, Rovigo, and Bugeaud--had cut their teeth in the Vendée, Spain, and Haïti. Especially in the years between 1839 and 1847, they put down Algerian resistance with brutal force, having learned in those prior campaigns that the only way to crush irregular resistance was to attack civilian populations that supported it. A spiraling cycle of attack and retribution ensued. Brower presents an unflinching portrait of famous episodes, like the Dahra asphyxiations, under Colonel Aimable Jean-Jacques Pélissier in June 1845 (22-23). When the Ouled Riah refused the terms of surrender Pélissier offered and took refuge in a mountain cave, the French colonel instructed his men to build a huge fire at the cave's entrance and stoke it through the night. They killed roughly a thousand people, including men, women, and children. Having presented dramatic cases of French brutality and the common use of terms like "extermination," Brower effectively places them in context:

France never embraced a policy designed to exterminate Algerians, nor was there a systematic effort to push Algerians entirely out of the country and take their land. A settler colony had need of land, to be sure, but early on colonial planners identified other means to obtain it, such as sequestration and confiscation or, more efficiently, by putting land on the market through the individuation of land tenure and new land codes. Labor was the more important variable for success in Algeria, and colonial planners expected Algerians to provide the manpower needed by settlers and the state (p. 24).

Even the brutal Bugeaud rejected a policy of extermination as a practical and political impossibility, if not a moral problem. There were already more than 90,000 French soldiers to protect 2,000 settlers engaged in farming (p. 42), and a troublesome opposition in the French parliament. Rather than a concerted policy dictated from Paris, military atrocities resulted, in Brower's account, primarily from

local causes, from the ecstatic sadism of soldiers, from the French command's desire to save face or to exact revenge.

The most original, important part of the book presents a case-study of an isolated Algerian attack on Djelfa, one of the southernmost French military outposts in the south with a small European settlement, in 1861. A group of fifty to sixty men and several boys, led by an aspiring leader of the Ramaniyya Sufi order named Si Tayeb, entered the European settlement on the night of 14–15 April 1861. Armed with staffs, stones, and knives, they attacked five homes and a *café maure*; striking with premeditated, brutal force, the group killed two men and a five-year-old girl and critically wounded three settlers, two laborers, and three soldiers. The settlers, later joined by French soldiers, killed four of the attackers. Si Tayeb escaped. Reticent in his introduction, Brower explains the historiographical stakes here:

[R]esearchers have privileged large-scale anticolonial movements, the struggles of Abdelkader, Ahmed Bey of Constantine, Mokrani (Muhammad al-hajj al-Muqrani, 1815–1871), and so forth. These show the united face of Algerian resistance to best advantage – an expression important to previous historiography. But much armed anticolonial activity was more like the ‘varied and sometimes confused expressions of peasant discontent’ typical of social movements elsewhere in colonial Africa. . . . There is a pressing need to reexamine these sorts of events (p. 93).

What matters here are not the mortality figures. Relatively few people died. Instead, Brower calls attention to the motivation behind the killing and teases out a complex, compelling portrait of the relationship between colonizer and colonized.

To explain how Si Tayeb managed to attract a following, Brower begins with an excellent chapter on the economic disruption inflicted by the French. Building on the great French theses of Nouschi, Rey-Goldzeiguer, and Ageron, Brower challenges their collective insistence on the centrality of settlers in the disruption of indigenous economic and social institutions,[6] and he presents a much more critical portrait of the military Arab Bureaus than either Xavier Yacono or Jacques Frémeaux.[7] Located at a strategic passage through the Saharan Atlas Mountains, Djelfa had an arid climate with wildly fluctuating extremes in temperature. Precipitation is typically light, 11.7–15.6 inches annually, and severe drought occurred every seven to ten years. These climatic extremes give the area considerable ecological diversity, and variations in altitude help further broaden that ecological range. That diversity, in turn, is particularly well suited to pastoralism. In the nineteenth century, the region's economy centered on raising ruminants, sheep and goats, with some grain cultivation. Local groups subsisted on the produce of their herds and traded the surplus, mainly raw wool, for dates on their seasonal journeys to winter pastures in the northern Sahara. Those seasonal migrations were important, Brower notes, not only for trade but to protect herds from epidemics that struck livestock in the north during the winter (96–97). Local groups occupied a central position in a network of trade that linked the date-growing oases of the Sahara with cereal-producing zones in the coastal Tell.

French measures disrupted those trade networks by forcing producers to specialize. In order to neutralize the independence and military capacity of pastoral groups, colonial authorities passed a series of measures to concentrate the wool trade in markets under French control. Encouraged by the promise of higher prices, Algerian pastoralists produced as much wool as possible. To do so, however, and to ensure the quality demanded, they had to adopt the sedentary grazing used by European farmers. Not only did pastoralists face intense competition for grazing lands, they had to obtain permits from a nearby Arab Bureau before moving their herds. This French attempt to rationalize land use prevented timely decisions and alienated local groups, who saw the health of their livestock deteriorate. Tensions typically ran highest in the spring, when everyone felt the burdens of taxation. The commercial and agricultural practices the French brought with them exacerbated existing tensions within Algerian society and left residents of areas like Djelfa unable to respond to environmental challenges they had survived in the past. In 1861, the year of the massacre at Djelfa, one local group lost fifty percent of its

ewes to disease (p. 110). If the people of Djelfa escaped the various land ordinances, judicial condemnations, and outright confiscations that stole land from Algerians in the Tell, French policy left them vulnerable and bred discontent: “[I]t did not take legions of settlers for French colonialism to alter societies like the Ouled Nail” (p. 107).

Local religious traditions also figured prominently in the raid. Having done their best to restructure secular leadership in the Sahara, the French created opportunities for men of God. Si Tayeb ben Bou Chandougha (Si Tayyib ibn Bu Shandougha) appeared in local pastures a week before the beginning of Ramadan in 1861. According to witnesses, he was a stranger to the groups who offered him hospitality. He soon won renown for exceptional piety, for praying louder than others, for his intensity. According to a later French investigation, Si Tayeb was of modest origin, had no formal education, and barely knew how to read. But he convinced many of his supernatural powers as he traversed the pastures around Djelfa. A local witness told French investigators:

Si Tayeb approached us and murmured in our ears words that we did not understand. He blew on our faces and swept his arms over us. He spit in our mouths. After this, we fell to the ground wailing. He would then hit us repeatedly with his staff. We felt as if flames shot through our chests, and we suffered great pains in our heads. We didn't have the strength to resist the will of the *mukaddam* any longer, and the ground gave way under our feet. We hastened to follow him everywhere. (p. 119)

Having won authority, Si Tayeb had to fend off challenges. On 12 April 1861, at the festival marking the end of Ramadan, *īd al-fitr*, Si Tayeb announced that he would lead a pilgrimage to the tomb of the widely respected leader of the Saharan branch of the Rahmaniyya Sufi order, Si Mokhtar ben Kalifa, who had died the prior autumn, leaving a terrible void. Attracting such a large crowd for a trip to Si Mokhtar's tomb testified to Si Tayeb's growing authority. But maintaining that authority was another matter altogether. He lacked the support of any established religious notables in the region. While he could inspire fidelity among people alienated by French-appointed leaders and traditional elites who failed them in the crisis years of the late 1850s and early 1860s, he could not count on endless devotion. He had to act. He had repeatedly to prove that could provide access to God's blessings. When a rival leader sent a representative to Si Tayeb's group and demanded their return, Si Tayeb exploded in a rage. Return they would, but in order to exterminate the French: “You will only have to watch. With the tip of my finger I alone will exterminate Djelfa. The Christians' powder will not speak against you” (p. 125).

Brower treats Saharan slavery in similar fashion. He organizes three short chapters around the story of a Fula-speaking slave woman named Saaba who arrived in the remote oasis town of Ouargla in the summer of 1877, having trekked across the Sahara on foot from her home on the Niger River. Although we learn little of Saaba's experience —Brower bases his account on a photograph, a few paragraphs of text from a chance interview, and an offhand passage in a monthly report written by a French officer—he uses the brief outline of her life story to structure a synthesis of recent work on the role of slavery in the Maghreb. He provides a brief overview of the Umarian Wars and slave raiding in the middle Niger River region, and then explores the endurance of slavery in the face of very ambivalent French efforts at abolition, concentrating on the annexation of the Mزاب in 1882. As in his treatment of the Djelfa massacre, Brower calls attention to the ways in which French colonization destabilized Algerian society without being able to contain or control the changes it wrought. During the nineteenth century, roughly six thousand people crossed the Sahara west of Egypt every year bound for lives of servitude. That made Saharan slavery a mainstay of Maghrebi economies, one that endured into the twentieth century. The governor general's office spoke out forcefully against slavery, in accord with the abolition law of 1848. But in practice, the same administration urged leniency on subordinates in low-profile cases and in situations with larger strategic interests at stake. Ultimately, the bulk of enforcement remained in the hands of local commanders who used abolition laws selectively, either to reward loyal Algerian elites or punish those they found troublesome.

The final section, “Imagining France’s Saharan Empire,” is less successful. In this final pair of chapters, Brower moves from the social and religious to the ideological. While this move demonstrates impressive intellectual range, the connection to earlier material is unclear, and the material itself is not as rich or fully developed. Up to this point, Brower has stressed local, Algerian contexts for violent outbursts and the limits of French power, limits that forced colonial officials to engage with indigenous leaders and traditions. Here he sets out, first, to identify a specific French imaginary construction of the Sahara as a place incompatible with peace, compromise, and moderation. He begins with the work of artists and intellectuals, and then moves on to the reports of colonial administrators: “Romantic idioms and perhaps even a ‘Romantic psychosis’ infiltrated French texts of the Sahara, and these had an important impact on the outcome of policymaking, including the introduction of a cult of violence” (p. 213). Brower suggests but does not show how notions of a Saharan sublime shaped the practices of colonial authorities. He makes no attempt to gauge the reception of discourses of the sublime or to distinguish representations of the Sahara from those of the Tell or High Plateaus, not to mention other colonial territories. Moreover, the suggestion that a discursive cult of violence caused violence on the ground in Algeria runs counter to the analysis offered in the prior chapters. It seems unlikely that soldiers needed to read official reports or picaresque literature to demonize the enemy. These chapters present disembodied discourses without the attention to context and local influences that distinguish the rest of the book.

Taken together, these four discrete parts call attention to the understudied Algerian interior. Whether or not evidence from the interior can explain the nature and extent of violence in Algeria as a whole remains unclear, as does the relationship between civil and military leadership, so important to most works on French Algeria. Nor does the book take up the issue presented at the outset of relating the violence of conquest and everyday life under imperialism with the violence that succeeded it in the twentieth, and now the twenty-first, century. But each of the book’s four parts is carefully constructed and closely argued. Collectively they present a challenging new vision of French overseas expansion. Rather than a product of modern capitalism or the European Enlightenment run amok, overwhelming subaltern groups, Brower’s imperialism is a much more ambivalent, uneven process. He shows how politicians and military authorities consistently failed to limit themselves to territory they could defend. Unable to monopolize violence, the French had to contend with indigenous actors and institutions as well as European auxiliaries with consistently explosive results.

## NOTES

[1] Martin, *Violence et Révolution: Essai sur la naissance d’un mythe national* (Paris : Seuil, 2006); J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Mazower, “Violence and the State in the Twentieth Century,” *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 4 (Oct., 2002): 1158-1178.

[2] Martin, *Violence et Révolution*, chapter five.

[3] *H-France Forum* Volume 2, Issue 2 (Spring 2007), No. 1.

[4] See, in particular, Raphaëlle Branche, *L’Embassade de Palestro : Algérie 1956* (Paris : Armand Colin, 2010).

[5] Cf. James McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 1-2 on the risk of reducing Algeria’s history to recurring cycles of violence.

[6] André Nouschi, *Enquête sur le niveau de vie des populations rurales constantinoises de la conquête jusqu’en 1919* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961); Annie Rey-Goldzeiguer, *Le Royaume arabe : La Politique algérienne de Napoléon III, 1861-1870* (Algiers : Société Nationale d’Édition et de Diffusion,

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1977); and Charles-Robert Ageron, *Les Algériens musulmans et la France, 1871-1919*, 2 vols. (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1968).

[7] Yacono, *Les Bureaux arabes et l'évolution des genres de vie dans l'ouest du Tell algérois (Dahra, Chélif, Ouarsenis, Sersou)* (Paris : Larose, 1953); Frémeaux, *Les Bureaux arabes dans l'Algérie de la conquête* (Paris : Denoël, 1993).

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