

## Comptes Rendus Méga-Tchad - Mega-Chad Book Reviews

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**SENÉ, Florent, 2011, *Raids dans le Sahara central (Tchad, Libye, 1941-1987). Sarra ou le rezzou décisif*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 402 p.**

Book review: Ole Martin Gaasholt, School of Oriental and African Studies, London

At a time when Hissène Habré is the object of loud calls for extradition, while Muammar Gaddafi, his patron and then enemy, suffered a violent demise last year, a review of recent historical events involving these two men should not go amiss. Florent Sené's book, *Raids dans le Sahara central (Tchad, Libye, 1941-1987). Sarra ou le rezzou décisif* details events characterised by the interrelations between these two men and their two countries with an exhilarating abundance of detail. Or rather, these two men, and even Chad and Libya, are only part of the vast canvas presented to us by the author. The wealth and breadth of the themes and materials treated is nonetheless held together by the overarching focus on the Saharan desert and some of its distinctive inhabitants, the Toubou, and the art of war as practised in the desert, taking the Toubou raid as the definitive pattern of the archetypal and also most effective form of desert warfare.

The author can thus bring together in the same book colonial conquest, partly overlooked, and downright thrilling, accounts of desert exploits having involved the Sahara and even Central Africa in the Second World War in ways this reader would never have guessed as well as a highly instructive yet engrossing treatment of the tragic but also surprisingly dynamic civil war of Chad.

Presenting his book as an essay in modern African military history, the author makes all the different military events that constitute the stuff of the book, predominantly raids of some kind, all build towards the decisive one referred to in the book's subtitle. In fact, his thesis is the supremacy of a modernised version of the time-honoured nomad raid over conventional military methods. Since the Second World War, when Allied forces could inflict defeats on the Axis in a parallel desert war with lightly armoured, mobile forces, an alternative paradigm has existed to the one of heavily armoured units and air superiority. Indeed, some of the most devastating raids targeted airfields. And the high points of the mounting offensive of the Chadians against the Libyan occupiers consisted in low-key attacks against their air bases.

Not that the Chadians had not received modern armaments and outside support. The issues of wider, global, relations, as they could ironically impinge on 'a hole in the sand', is part of the framework. Gaddafi's geopolitical ideas led him to focus on the Saharan *hinterland*, arguing for Chad as an extension of Libya, mimicking in that notions once brandished by the Italian fascists. Heavy-handed methods, using modern weaponry to its most horrific effect against elusive nomad opponents, were also shared by those imperialist colonisers and the revolutionary 'Guide'. Weaponry and geopolitics also characterised Gaddafi's backers, the Eastern block and revolutionary Arab regimes, and his opponents in a Cold War setting, France and the USA.

While the USA under Reagan scarcely down-played its enmity towards Gaddafi, France attempted to maintain a more balanced position. Even if France supported N'Djamena, outright confrontation with Libya was usually avoided at considerable effort. And so the

attention turns to the politics and military tactics of the people dominating Chad, the Toubou and related ethnic groups, and this in spite of outside influence and the attendant flow of weapons buoying them.

Notwithstanding the outside meddling, resulting in what the author calls a *de facto* franco-libyan condominium over Chad, the author's emphasis is on African actors in an African war. So in addition to the well-known political and military leaders, an almost forgotten Chadian strategist, Hassan Djamouss, is brought out of oblivion. As Hissène Habré's chief of operations, he was the military genius successfully planning and executing the daring raids on Libyan positions superior in both numbers and weaponry. Contrary to established military doctrine, Djamouss's operations managed to defeat armoured units through the action of Toubou and other Chadians mounted on Toyotas firing anti-tank weapons while driving at break-neck speed. They thus also gained access to airfields, destroying a staggering number of costly and sophisticated airplanes, and capturing anti-aircraft missiles for their own use. In the end, the human and material losses forced Gaddafi to abandon his projects of taking control of Chadian territory, and eventually even the disputed Aouzou strip was passed on to arbitration by the International Court of Justice.

Meanwhile, Libya's loss was Chad's gain as weapons and equipments were pillaged. Those that were too complicated for the Chadians' own use were passed on to their Western allies, anxious to gain knowledge of Soviet weapons. Events in Chad thus once more became of central concern as a remote theatre focussing global oppositions. For Central Africa, of which Chad form part while abutting on North Africa, will always be connected to global developments, affecting all the surrounding countries.

With its focus on military exploits, the book contains multiple references to military organisation and not least weapons. This, however, only brings out the author's clear grasp on military matters past and present, and his enthusiasm for and commitment to his project. The sources are numerous, and the author always appears to draw on additional knowledge and to possess a vast *hinterland* of supplementary information. The illustrations are varied, and many come from the author's personal collection. His attachment to his subject is further demonstrated by his profound knowledge of the wider area and its general history, including the pre-colonial development of caravan trade by the Senoussi brotherhood and the gradual exploration of the desert in colonial times. Such references place the subject in a wider context, providing basic ethnographic and geographical information shedding light on the main events.

Drawing upon his vast reading, Florent Sené can end the book on a well-turned anecdote remounting to Antiquity and involving Carthage and Cyrenaica. The wisdom of the ancients contrasts with the tale opening the book, the one of the largely forgotten and completely failed airborne intervention of Libya at Entebbe in 1979 to support Idi Amin. One thus begins and ends with the ultimate failure of Gaddafi's Libya in its adventures in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In contrast to this is the inventiveness and adaptability of the Toyota-mounted Chadians organised by Djamouss. The book's ultimate merit is thus precisely to bring out military exploits and the military history of modern Africans, even if they drew on their own traditions, which has not received its share of attention. This is a history that can only continue to surprise as long as the sophistication of its participants is not recognised.

As for Djamouss himself, he received some initial recognition after his death from Idriss Déby, Hissène Habré's erstwhile associate who subsequently supplanted him. But Idriss Déby has since largely usurped Djamouss's victories in official Chadian history. Gaddafi eventually had to give in. How long will it be before others with an exaggerated place in history will have to yield theirs?

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