

Book Review of “Wartime North Africa: A Documentary History, 1934–1950” edited by Aomar Boum and Sarah Abrevaya Stein¹²

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The reviewed book offers a modern interpretation of the events of World War 2 in North Africa and its aftermath using documents from 1934 until 1950. The above sentence is both a praise and a critique of this unique volume which presents mostly English translations of original North African documents of the era for the first time.

Its modernity is visible almost immediately after the start of reading. Unlike previous centuries’ and decades’ history related books and papers it does not focus on institutions, states or the event itself but on everyday humans. How did these people, local population of North Africa interned, or displaced persons even prisoners lived and survived this inhumane period, in a barely researched area during the tumultuous times of before and after the great cataclysm.

And here we immediately encounter the limits of the given approach. Though the title and the introduction promises a glimpse into the lives of women and men, and children with various religious and ethnic background, yet the material’s significant majority deals with the once 500 000 strong Maghreb Jewry. Naturally it wouldn't be a problem in itself since the half million who used to live in the cities like Algiers, Casablanca and other exotic dwellings are gone by now almost without a trace. Smaller part of them died in one of the least known areas of the Holocaust, “the lucky survivors” were pressurized or to be more precise were forced to leave their ancestors’ land and move to Israel.

The book consists of various documents in chronological order from the era meticulously translated into modern English. The sources have been translated from Arabic, French, Hebrew, Italian, North African Judeo-Arabic, Moroccan Darija, Spanish, Yiddish even Tamazight (Berber), as well as transcribed texts from English.

Official reports of events, other reports, pamphlets, poems, newspaper articles, even parts of diaries show a vivid picture of a bustling, lively and vibrating social and economic life endangered by Hitler's rise and later the start of the Second World War. Touching personal stories like the one about a Paris educated writer and artist selling out his poems in pamphlets about the danger the modern “Haman” means for Jews of the word (p, 24). Later realizing that his writings can cause him serious trouble he bought

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² Aomar Boum and Sarah Abrevaya Stein: *Wartime North Africa: A Documentary History, 1934–1950*, Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2022. ISBN: 9781503611511, pp. 384.

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them back and recklessly tried to destroy them all, some of them miraculously survived. It is heartbreaking to see the events leading to the destruction of this community through contemporary eyes. The racial laws of the collaborator Vichy-regime (p. 123), and the coming of the little known yet as cruel as anywhere else activities of SD Einsatz-Kommando Tunis SS (p.131-133) orchestrating the final solution in North Africa.

The continuous push to reduce Jewish rights in North Africa, the slow but steady strangulation of the 2000 years old communities and the tragic conclusion of the German occupation does not stop the reviewer wondering what else if anything else could have been done. The presented moving human fates are intertwined with stories about foreigners. A former member of the Spanish republican international brigades originally from Poland interned to Africa by French authorities (p. 317), a prisoner of war, a tirailleur, a Senegalese French soldier later the first president of independent Senegal (p. 63) and others all describe facets of history almost completely unknown.

It was a magnificent trip and at the same time a sorrowful journey that has led the reviewer through this world utterly destroyed by two waves of history. What a different title this book could have offered an interesting insight into the already gone world of the multiethnic North African life under French rule. Negotiating French rule, the clearly racist regulation of the Vichy regime is unexplainably little known in most parts of the world. How crooked that system was is clearly shown in a pamphlet my author uses fabricated primitive Arabic to attack the incompetence and the indecisiveness of the collaborators. Yet waiting for a detailed description of events promised by the title has left a continuous longing in the reviewer especially that the editors themselves have written in the preface that the area was populated by a huge number of different groups. In the 16 years discussed in the book.

The reviewer must note that the definitively unknown concept of *négritude* presented by Léopold Sédar Senghor, the first Senegalese president would have had a more detailed presentation than a passing note (p. 39 and 63).

Unfortunately, the modern approach does not stop at the anomalies of the title. It is undeniably a dark side of an already sinister phenomenon, sexual assault in military conflicts that is. Yet it is unquestionably a part of it ever since wars have been started. That kind of surprise towards the fact that women and the girls between 15-50, in worst cases 7-77 are indeed endangered in military operations it's quite a shock. Sexual insults, violence, and rape was, is, and will be accompanying huge amounts of men living in extreme danger for longer period of times. As a side note, it is worth remembering the number of combat incapable American soldiers infected by sexual diseases were always higher than combat losses during the campaign in North Africa.

The other evidence pointing at the lack of the barest minimum of relevant military history knowledge and the overwhelming effect of preconceptions in the text is the highly questionable description of image 11 on page 165. According to it a German soldier offers a local a cigarette under the threat of violence. Be it from courtesy or

negligence the fact that a significant part of Arab locals logically preferred the unknown Germans to the known French colonists is not even mentioned. On the other hand, the alleged “rifle”, which is an MP38 or 40 submachine gun, is clearly unloaded as there is no magazine in the weapon. Not to mention its position which confirms the safe use of firearms. Would the soldier threaten the clearly local man with violence he had pointed the gun towards him. Loaded. It is the fact that the empty gun is pointing backwards that is proving he's benevolent, even more than the fact that he offers a cigarette especially given the probable language difficulties between the two.

To summarize the above a title like: The fate of Maghreb Jewry, or Eyewitness accounts: Events leading to the Holocaust and its aftermath in North Africa would have been much more fitting. While the translation of various first-hand accounts and documents from exotic languages is more than welcome, especially about the fate of the already completely disappeared yet for two millennia vibrating societies, a more balanced and detailed view of the described era and region would have been very much appreciated. Writing about wartime is unimaginable without knowing war.