REVIEW ESSAY


Reviewed by Fouad Moughrabi

*Genocide in Libya* represents a significant contribution to the study of settler colonialism, genocide, Libyan history, and fascism. Its primary focus is the Italian colonization of Libya beginning in 1911. When the fascists came to power in 1922, the process of colonization intensified in order to settle Italians in this North African country. Naturally, local resistance to this settler colonialism started almost immediately and intensified mostly in the eastern part of Libya led by the Senusiyya movement. The leader of the resistance was the charismatic Omar al-Mukhtar, known as the “Lion of the Desert.” In response, the Italians began, in 1929, to forcibly transfer population from the east in order to deprive the resistance of material support. Estimates vary; but nearly 110,000 Libyans, about two-thirds of the population in Cyrenaica, were deported to 16 concentration camps, more aptly described as death camps. Only 40,000 eventually survived. In today’s common parlance, that was genocide.

For the record, let us first look at the definition of genocide. The author quotes the father of genocide studies, the Polish legal scholar Raphael Lemkin, whose contribution is enshrined in Article II of the Genocide Convention. Lemkin identifies two key elements: “the intentionality of killing and, second, the policy of destroying physical, biological, and cultural patterns of life” (p. 3).

Ahmida spent nearly ten years working on this book, traveling to Libya, Italy, Egypt, and Tunisia looking for archival evidence. He discovered that the Italians either hid or destroyed much of the archives about what they did in the concentration camps and threw numerous obstacles in his path. Any other scholar facing the same problems would have probably given up at some point. Not our author. He vigorously pursued other avenues to carry out his research about the genocide in the camps.

I was puzzled upon reading this work why there was no mention of Italian colonial genocide in Libya and Ethiopia in the work of the great Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. His conceptual frame of bare life and states of exception

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is starkly realized and implemented in the Italian colonization of Libya. However, this sordid reality was almost totally absent in Italian academia and popular culture. Ahmida shows how a systematic pattern of hiding, destroying, and manipulating incriminating files by Italian officials eventually helped promote the myth, commonly known as *italiani brava gente*, meaning: the Italians are “good” and “decent” colonizers (p. 167).

Ahmida also shows how Nazi generals who visited Libya on several occasions ended up using the same techniques to build their own death camps in Europe. In other words, colonial genocide in Africa became the laboratory for the European Holocaust.

Ahmida’s fine research is inspired by the works of Hannah Arendt, Mike Davis, Mahmood Mamdani, and James C. Scott. In addition, one can see hovering throughout the text insights from Frantz Fanon and Edward Said, as well as Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault, among others.

This book is a journey of discovery: of the self, of Libya, and its history; of Italian Fascism and its hidden colonial brutality. It is written from the perspective of the victims whose voices are now being heard. The methodological approach shatters the disciplinary boundaries, always artificial in any case, and courageously delves into oral history and literary criticism, in addition to the social sciences. I would venture to say, and this is no exaggeration, that this work has echoes from another noted North African scholar, namely, Ibn Khaldun.

In the nineteenth century, with the rise of European power, the classification of world populations “naturally” ranked whites on top. All others were of lesser value and therefore expendable. Indigenous populations were viewed as savages and nomads who had no roots and therefore could easily be displaced or eliminated to make room for European settlers. This is largely true of contemporary America where people have to be reminded that Black Lives *do* Matter. In Palestine, the life of one Jew matters more than the lives of many Palestinians. One can go on and on listing other examples. It is, therefore, not surprising that Italians of all ideological colors did not place much value on the lives of semi-nomadic tribes in Eastern Libya. Neither the Zionists nor the Italian Fascists anticipated the toughness of native resistance to their settler colonial projects. The question is where did this toughness come from? How can we account for the unusually high levels of solidarity among semi-nomadic people scattered throughout the unforgiving and harsh desert?

In the case of Libya, Ahmida examines the unique role of the Senusiyya movement, the social backbone of the resistance to Italian colonialism. Founded in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, in 1837 by the Algerian Muhammad ibn Ali as-Senussi, it was linked to Sufism and was concerned about the decline of Islamic thought, as well as the growing threat from the materialistic West. Senussi studied at Al-Azhar
University in Cairo and later founded his first monastery (Zawiya) at Abu Qubays near Mecca. Apparently he ran into trouble with the Wahhabis who eventually forced him out. In 1843, he moved to Cyrenaica in Libya where he established the Zawiya Bayda. Between 1902 and 1913, the Senussis fought against French colonial expansion in North Africa, as well as against Italy’s colonization beginning in 1911. By 1923, the indigenous rebels associated with the Senussi order were able to use this innovative social movement to organize the Libyan resistance against Italian settlements.

Apparently, Libyan resistance was so intense that, in addition to herding people in 16 concentration (death) camps, Italian military leaders resorted to the sealing of wells, confiscation of herds, closing the border with Egypt, and dropping rebels from airplanes. Omar al-Mukhtar was eventually captured and hanged on September 11, 1931, at Slug camp in front of 20,000 interns forced to attend by the Italians. Four of his commanders were trapped along the Egyptian border; one died, two were captured, and one managed to escape into Egypt. This signaled the end of the resistance.

Ahmida says that the bulk of his research took place in Libya where he discovered original material on the interned Libyans, in national and private family archives. He was able to interview nearly 30 of the survivors of the camps and managed several fieldwork visits to the campsites, between the years 2000 and 2015. He notes the importance of the Libyan Studies Center in Tripoli, the site of one of the most remarkable oral history projects in the world. The author discovered that the Center also had the record of interviews with 220 survivors. He sadly confirms, however, that the modern Libyan state failed to preserve and maintain the sites of the camps and therefore contributed to the marginalization of their history.

Unable to find enough material in the official archives, the author resorted to analyzing the oral traditions and the role of poetry in keeping the history alive. It appears that there were hundreds of men and women poets in Cyrenaica, to the point where one could talk about a society of bards. One particular epic poem encapsulated the suffering of the people in the camps. “Mabi-Marad” (no illness but this place) by Rajab Buhwaysh became widely known among Libyans and read by school children. The poet was interned at the Egaila concentration camp, reserved mostly for the relatives of the resistance fighters.

The great Libyan poet Khaled Mattawa did an excellent translation (p. xiii). Here are the first lines that Libyan school children would immediately recognize:

I have no illness but this place of Egaila’

The imprisonment of my tribe

And separation from my kin’s abode. (p. 186)
The poem describes the horrors, pain, and longing and does it with dignity and grace. Another poet, Ahmad Rafiq al-Mahdawi, produced a major poem, titled “Ghaith al-Saghir,” which dealt with the effects of the camps on children. It is also important to note that there were several major women poets including, among others, Fatima Uthman, who wrote “Kharabin Ya Watan,” and Um al-Khair Abd al-Dayim. Here is a brief excerpt from Uthman’s poem:

Ruined twice my homeland
Some are dead hanging in
The gallows and others are
Forced to flee in exile
We are ruined twice my homeland. (p. 98)

Ahmida had to overcome the natural suspicion of the population about researchers who might be connected with government and who might be gathering information that could be used against them. This is usually the case throughout the Arab World and elsewhere where oppressive governments prevail. Fortunately, Ahmida passed the test when it was discovered that he hailed from a well-established family known for its contribution to the resistance. He was then given free access.

Ahmida notes that, as a result of death and exile, the Libyan population declined from 1.5 million in 1911 to nearly 779,072 in 1934. The survivors of the death camps were freed in early 1934, but they were placed under surveillance for two years after that. They were not allowed to return to their homes because their lands were given to Italian settlers. The interviews with survivors are heart wrenching. Here is an example: “I watched my family’s death in front of my eyes. My mother and brothers and I were the only ones who survived the interment. I became an orphan and was recruited to join the Italian army in the war in Ethiopia. I was 15 years old” (p. 93).

The author provides a useful description of the rise of modern Libya, first under the monarchy and then the republic, established by army officers in 1969 led by Qaddafi. Ahmida then chronicles the revolt that overthrew Qaddafi and the ensuing disintegration.

*Genocide in Libya* revises in a dramatic way the history of settler colonialism, fascism, and genocide, including Holocaust studies. It should be read by anyone who wants to learn about Libya and its history. One cannot really understand what is happening in the country in 2021 without an appreciation of the deep scars inflicted on the Libyan people. This cannot be done by looking at the region through the prism of traditional Western social science. This important and unique
labor of love by Ali Abdullatif Ahmida does not only challenge Western paradigms, but also shows us how a decolonizing methodology can be done. Finally someone has produced the kind of brilliant work that honors the memory of those who lost their life in those tragic years. They deserve no less.