

Qtelni ash-shar

In Algeria, the word *shar* (شَرّ) developed different meanings after French colonization. Though the Arabic word *shar* literally translates to ‘evil’, in Algerian Arabic, however, *shar* also means ‘hunger’. In a present-day context, *shar* can be used to express hunger dramatically: *qtelni ash-shar*, literally ‘hunger killed me’, expresses being very hungry. However, the word’s historical roots are steeped in poverty and famine under French occupation. This particular meaning of ‘hunger’ developed after a period of famine in 1866–1868 which was a direct result of French colonial malevolence and led to tens of thousands of Algerian deaths. A complex series of factors led to the famine, including shortages of labor, limited grain storage, a lack of cash, and the grave miscalculations of the French colonial government that over-exported Algerian crops to France.

Consequently, hunger gradually became synonymous with evil. That period of history is captured in the well-known painting *Famine en Algérie* (1868) by Gustave Guillaumet.¹ The painting poignantly depicts meagre naked bodies that turned to greenish yellow because of malnutrition. All eyes in the painting are fixed on a loaf of bread being handed from a high window by a clean white hand with opulent rings and a pearl bracelet; all eyes except those of the dead, the dying, and the grieving who lost hope.

Being Algerian, I grew up as an inheritor of colonial trauma, and, like many others, I believed that French colonialism was the most pernicious of all colonialisms. But *Genocide in Libya: Shar, a Hidden Colonial History* (2021) opened my eyes to the suffering of Libyans under Italian colonization. Written by the Libyan researcher and polit-

1 See Gustave Guillaumet, *Tableaux algériens* (Paris: Plon, 1888–1891), <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k57894284>

ical scientist Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, the book is piercingly poignant on the breadth of colonial *shar*. It is now shameful to confess, but I, erroneously, had believed that Italian colonialism was more benevolent when compared to French colonialism. Through the oral testimony of Libyan survivors, and Ahmida's sharp analysis, the reader of this book is bound to face an irreversible and inevitable truth: all colonialism is evil. This ground-breaking investigation of the forgotten Libyan genocide uncovers the obscured history of the fascist Italian concentration camps, particularly of the years 1929-1934. The book also connects the Libyan genocide to the colonial roots of the Holocaust and genocide studies through comparative and cross-cultural readings.

The testimonials gathered by Ahmida show that, despite the efforts deployed to move on from a dark and gruesome chapter in history, the concentration camps became a living moment of cultural formation. Thousands of Libyans died between 1929 and 1934 because of murder, deportations, and incarceration conducted and supervised by Italian fascists. Abductions, enforced disappearances, forced displacement, and imprisonment in 16 different concentration camps; this was the story that Libyans documented and bequeathed to future generations through their oral traditions.

How many people know about the Holocaust? But how many people know about the concentration camps in Libya? And how many people know that the Italian concentration camps in Libya were a blueprint of the Holocaust? The answers to these questions will unquestionably raise awareness about our collective lack of knowledge regarding colonial genocides. Ahmida brilliantly reveals facts that remained hidden from most history books, for example, "The use of gas to exterminate people was first applied in Libya in 1929 and then in Ethiopia in 1935" (p. 10). These facts are both shocking and enraging: how and why do we not learn about this in our schools? This lack of knowledge—or selective knowledge to be more precise—was the impetus for Ahmida's research questions. The book also makes one realize that when it comes to cultural studies, the quality of research is determined by the researcher's willingness to stand within culture and study it. Standing apart, within one's comfort zone, does not suffice.

The book presents multidisciplinary readings of cultural representations, narratives, and primary sources. The chapters are interlaced, and the book cross-examines the archival, oral, literary, and theoretical sources and debates from Libya, Africa generally, and Europe. The book rightfully asks and answers: "who writes history? It is not

just historians but also journalists, cartoonists, poets, politicians, university lecturers, religious figures, novelists, and bureaucrats hired by the state to write school text and set exam questions" (p. 148).

The politics of colonial and Arabic sources and archives are critiqued and mapped in chapter one. This chapter also shows the author's reflective and ethical concerns in locating and obtaining information. Chapter two examines the historiography of Italian Fascism, as well as the issues of genocide and silence. It concludes with an introduction to orality and poetry as forms of cultural transmission. Survivors' testimonials, oral narratives, and poems are featured in chapter three. This chapter gives new insight on forced deportation and how age, gender, and class influenced the chances of survival and demise. This new material reconstructs a complicated social history of a surviving culture in eastern Libya; a history that survived state and elite control both during and after colonization. Chapter four traces the harsh experiences of imprisonment and its aftermath after survival. The beginnings of the modern state are outlined in chapter five: Libya transitioned from monarchy to republic to dictatorship between 1951 and 1969, and between 1977 and 2011. The conclusion returns to the book's core critical questions, with a critique of Eurocentrism.

Ahmida argues that the massacres of Libyans fit the requirements defined by the father of modern genocide studies, Raphael Lemkin. In his argument, Ahmida draws on two conditions of qualification put forward in 1948 at the UN Convention by Lemkin, a Polish legal scholar: The intentionality of killing and the destruction of physical, biological, and cultural patterns of life. For these reasons, the book suggests that the Holocaust was a re-manifestation of colonial genocide. Thus, the book does not only open our eyes to the colonial genocide in Libya in particular, but it also invites us to re-examine the Holocaust as a "colonial case and that the Libyan case contributed directly to its making" (p. 173).

One of the most interesting films about the Holocaust is *Kapo* (1960) directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, who might be more remembered by North Africans for his world-famous film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). 'Kapo' refers to an imprisoned overseer at a Nazi concentration camp. Centering the experience of a young Jewish girl who becomes a kapo, Pontecorvo's film explores the complex relationships between Nazi dehumanization of victims and how resistance re-valorizes life. Ahmida's book also, taking a similar angle, bravely tackles the dark history of Libyan collaborators who served fascists as advisors, guards,

guides, and so forth. Moreover, the book's descriptions of the Italian concentration camps in Libya evokes the same images from both Pontecorvo films, bringing Ahmida's argument to full prominence: the concentration camps in Libya were the inspiration for the Holocaust and the Holocaust was the legacy of colonialism. As the book shows, the Holocaust is founded in and modelled after colonial genocides in Africa, particularly the Rwandan slaughter and the Libyan concentration camps. Ahmida's study also adds to the copious body of evidence that the Nazis were directly interested in the fascist Italian government's activities.

This new and original history of the genocide is a key resource for readers interested in genocide and Holocaust studies, colonial and postcolonial studies, and African and Middle Eastern studies. To be sure, Algerian studies that focus on cross-examining Maghrebi colonial trauma would undoubtedly benefit from Ahmida's research. I believe it is also a must-read for anyone serious about learning the dark history of colonial evil, as well as the creative and steadfast efforts of decolonization, with survival being the first step of resisting fascism and *shar*.

