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France's Wars in Chad: Military Intervention and Decolonization in Africa. Nathaniel K. Powell. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. xvi + 360 pp. £75.00 hardback. ISBN 9781108488679.

The French-Chadian relationship counts as a long-standing example of French patronage and intervention in Africa. Ruthless Chadian dictators like Hissène Habré and Idriss Déby enjoyed French protection as military and logistical partners. And yet, it was not always so. Nathaniel Powell's meticulous reconstruction of French-Chadian relations in the 1960s and 1970s accentuates French failure rather than control, revealing the intricacies of a neocolonial relationship unravelling against the backdrop of the Chadian civil war (1965-1979), in which Chadian actors decisively influenced French policy.

Powell has produced a welcome English-language reappraisal, which departs from the orthodox view that France made a clean break from Empire in 1960. The book also contradicts exaggerations of France's continued machinations, which have painted Jacques Foccart as the French President's omnipotent African puppet master – views fuelled not least by Foccart himself. Instead, this is a story of Chadian government elites and militias vying for power, exploiting the sensitivities of France and Muammar Gaddafi's Libya to their own ends. In short, the book confirms 'the deep embeddedness of French actors within the Chadian state' (p. 13), but, more importantly, it shows how French neocolonialism temporarily fell on its sword over the major contradictions inherent in French African policy. Defending the dogma of French 'rayonnement' in Africa, Gaullist and Socialist Presidents consistently chose short-term stability over long-term security.

The book extends the above analysis in two ways. Not only does it integrate the presidential and operative levels, where ground-level senior officials and military officers of various ilk conveyed their views to the higher-ups. It does so from both the composite French perspective, and the myriad Chadian perspectives. In nine chronological chapters, an ‘unabashedly historical approach’ (p. 7) is delivered, with chapters bowing to each other. The initial chapters introduce the reader to a plethora of political, military and militia leaders, all faced with hard choices. Excepting the explanation of actors’ motivations and expectations, the main conclusions are saved for the final section. In between, the emergent and imperfect nature of French policy is made clear.

The colonial reflexes of the French military could not save Chad’s stubborn first president Tombalbaye, whose brutal tax collection and weak army spurred rebellion by FROLINAT in Northern Chad. After Tombalbaye’s assassination by his own generals in 1975, the French began a half-hearted search for a legitimate leader to secure Chad’s borders, accepting the (US sponsored) victory of warlord Habré in 1982. The book’s principal focus is on the seven years in between, retracing the debilitating attacks, furtive coalitions, and negotiations between ‘six different armed [Chadian] factions’ (p. 171) from various regional and ethnic backgrounds.

French actions endlessly vacillated between diplomatic neutrality and military support, between curtailing Libyan leader Gaddafi’s designs on Chad, and continuing arms trade to Libya. The parade of debating officials never achieved a fundamental re-evaluation of the foundations of French policy, in the exhortations of one French officer, to ‘Deploy in Faya-Largeau [against Libyan forces], or leave Chad!’ (p. 252). That said, France’s 1978 Operation Tacaud intervention, much like the 1980 Libyan invasion, proved inconclusive, leading African states in the region to lambast both states (while privately urging a continued French presence in Chad). Despite such foreign support, it is clear that Chadian factional leaders decided the

course of the civil war. Together with the parallel demonstration of restricted and backfiring French initiatives, this is one of the key points of the book.

In this complex narrative, the many threads of the Franco-Chadian relationship are revealed, including those involving Chad's neighbouring states. For instance, the seventh chapter describes the coup against Central African Republic's volatile dictator Jean-Bédél Bokassa by Tacaud's Chad-based forces, which alienated the president of the teetering Chadian transitional government, Goukouni Weddeye. This fascinating chapter reads as an aside to the Chadian quagmire, but illustrates the inherent follies of French African policy.

The antecedents, quirks, and turns of the Chadian power struggle are supported by extensive footnotes. The analysis synthesizes a vast body of scholarship with more recent archival sources, notably the 'Fonds Foccart' opened at the French National Archives in 2015, and testimonies of key actors, like Goukouni. No Chadian sources were consulted, which, given the present circumstances of their access, is no great criticism. The evidence on popular myths of French perfidy is carefully weighed, contextualised, and integrated into the narrative: for example, the Claustre affair, Tombalbaye's removal, and the diamond affair that damaged Giscard's chances of re-election, to name only a few.

At its end, the book leaves an impression of the profound untidiness of French-Chadian affairs, and of the misplaced hubris of French African policy more generally. By then, the reader will already have made connections to more recent interventions in regions of instability that aim to contribute externally to internal security.