

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



John Wright. *A History of Libya*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. 267 pp. \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-70167-9.

Reviewed by Steven Paget

Published on H-War (June, 2015)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

John Wright has produced a comprehensive and far-reaching history of Libya, which builds on his initial book from 1969.[1] Wright's first book was published prior to Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's rise to power, which led him to publish *Libya: A Modern History* in 1982. Wright continued to write about Libya and later expanded his 1969 book for the fortieth anniversary of its initial release, leading to the publication of a revised and retitled version in 2010. However, in view of the overthrow of Gaddafi, Wright commendably revised the book with the inclusion of an additional chapter on the Arab Spring. The result is an impressive overview of the history of Libya from the ancient hunter artists to the modern day.

Wright's intention was to provide an overarching review of the cultural, economic, political, and social history of Libya. In doing so, Wright offers important background information on the country's geography, climate, and demographics. What follows is a succession of insightful chapters on the influence of different groups of settlers and invaders (chapters 1-11). These chapters detail the extensive turmoil and upheaval that has occurred in Libya throughout its history. The book particularly focuses on the Italian era, the experience of Libya in the Second World War, and Libya's eventual independence (chapters 12-16). Wright then addresses the Sanussi Kingdom (chapter 17), the thoroughgoing nature of the revolution that led to the overthrow of the Sanussi monarchy, and Gaddafi's ultimate rise to power (chapter 18). Finally, Wright outlines what life was like for Libyans under Gaddafi, before considering the circumstances surrounding his eventual overthrow (chapters 18-19).

Wright's addition of a chapter on the Arab Spring is particularly pertinent, given his initial observation that history has been imposed on Libya (p. 1). If history had been imposed on Libya in the past, Libyans undoubtedly made their own history in 2011, albeit with the eventual assistance of NATO. Wright examines the cultural and social drivers of the revolution, which ultimately provides important historical context that is lacking in some accounts of the Arab Spring in Libya. Whilst historical factors were clearly significant, modern personal information technology was equally important in helping to propel the revolution (p. 232). The success achieved by Libyans in revolt resulted from a convergence of factors, which included the efforts of the rebels, the poor performance of the Libyan military, and the contribution of NATO air power. Wright concludes that the rebellion could not have been as successful as it was without the essential support of NATO air power (p. 237).

Whilst not doubting the importance of NATO air power, Wright is skeptical of the reasoning behind intervention. Wright asserts that the underlying but still visible objective of UN Resolution 1973 was widely understood to be regime change (p. 237), and he contends that, ultimately, NATO air power did rather more than merely protecting them [the rebels] from their own tyrants threatened and real retribution (p. 231). Wright observes that no NATO aircraft flew in to protect their vulnerable civilians in Syria or Yemen before opining: In short, neither seemed to offer the international community the same opportunities, nor the potential spending-power, as Libya's post-Gadafi era (p. 238). Whilst Wright is far from alone in his judgment, his assessment would have benefited from the inclusion

of more evidence in order to justify his conclusions or, at least, the provision of a fuller examination of the reasoning behind intervention and non-intervention in the aforementioned states.

From a military history perspective, Wright acknowledges that conflict has shaped Libya's history and touches on a number of important events. However, references to many of the military events are characterized by their brevity. For example, whilst the book addresses conflict in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, events such as the raid on the USS *Philadelphia* and Giulio Gavotti's aerial attack on Libyan irregulars with a hand grenade dropped from an aircraft are only touched on briefly. As Wright declares that the raid on the *Philadelphia* was described by Admiral Horatio Nelson as "the most bold and daring act of the age," military historians may have preferred a more detailed examination (p. 81). In fairness to Wright, these events were not pivotal factors in shaping Libyan history, and, therefore, his brevity is understandable.

Events of a military nature that had a longer-lasting effect on Libyan history are generally analyzed in greater depth. Wright provides a more detailed account of the turmoil in 1911-12 and the Tripolitanian War, which he describes as "one of the last and one of the hardest of the classic colonial wars" (p. 114). Wright also does an admirable job of addressing connections between international events, noting that the invasion of Iraq in 2003 "served as a very clear, if tacit, warning to Gaddafi that he, too, might yet suffer a similar fate" (p. 223). Libya's changing relationship with the West is crucial to understanding events since the rise of Gaddafi, culminating in the "regime's clever and timely international rehabilitation in 2003-04" (p. 232). Given the importance attached by Wright to NATO's intervention in 2011, it

is somewhat surprising that the shooting down of two Libyan aircraft by the United States over the Gulf of Sirte in August 1981 and the causes, conduct, and consequences of the 1986 bombing raids by US aircraft have not been addressed in greater detail in the revised edition. The lack of analysis of the military aspects of Libyan history, particularly in the earlier chapters, does not detract from the book as the purpose is to provide a broad overview, but it does ensure that it is a platform for further research rather than a definitive source of military history. However, military historians should not forget that an appreciation of cultural, political, and social factors is required to truly understand events of a military nature in Libya, and Wright does an excellent job of providing that contextual background.

Wright's book focuses on an important subject, which is still not receiving sufficient international attention despite the existence of a number of excellent works.[2] That many of Wright's endnotes frequently relate to books published a significant time ago is an indicator that there is scope for further research. *A Modern History of Libya* exhibits the benefits of Wright's long-term exposure to Libya, as the book contains insights and judgments that reach beyond those possible from a distant observer. It is that "insider" knowledge which ensures that Wright's book makes a valuable contribution to the historiography. Wright's book is more than a history of Libya. In many ways, it is a transnational history as Libya's history intersects with numerous other nations, especially Italy. This is not a military history—that was never Wright's purpose—but to understand Libya, one must have knowledge of the country's political and social history, which Wright helpfully outlines. Ultimately, *A Modern History of Libya* is a must-read for any serious scholar of Libya.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Steven Paget. Review of Wright, John, *A History of Libya*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. June, 2015.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=41472>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.